



# A STORY OF MANY SONGS

# LOVE

PHARRELL DOUGLAS



# **A Story of Many Songs**

Pharrell Douglas

At 3:41 PM, four airplanes crashed  
in different parts of the world.

I was on all four planes at the same  
time.

I only survived one.

I am running... I've seen this  
happen before.

This is my first time on Earth.

And I know I'm not alone.

My name is Myla and this is my  
story.

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Readers and supporting *A Story of  
Many Songs*.

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## Other books by Pharrell Douglas

### **Horizon**

"I should've realized soon enough they were  
looking for me all my life  
I was abducted in Delhi.  
Taken to Peru.  
They say we are five.  
They even have an army for us.  
And a mission.  
Worldwide destruction is about to befall  
mankind.  
And the only relic that can save us is lost 65  
million years B.C.  
So they brought us to the time machine.  
This is why we are here.  
Will you come with us?"  
*-Ivey Choi*

[Join the adventure with Ivey here.](#)



*it begins with love...*

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## **WILD PURPLE**

I wave my hand. All I feel is  
broken pieces of glass, steel and  
plastic scattered under my back and  
across the floor. I bring my hand to  
my forehead as I blink, slowly  
awakening in a world I don't know.  
A bright light pours in from a  
curved square window, meeting my  
face at full blaze.

I raise my hand to block the light  
and everything around me suddenly  
materializes. My heart jumps out of  
my chest and I choke on my own  
scream.

Dead bodies lie around me,  
mangled with shards of steel

protruding from their torsos. I quickly push myself back and I hit something. I shriek, spinning around to notice it's only a seat. That's when I see the columns of seats flanking me and running down the tunnel-like space, littered with death.

My mouth is agape as I continue to scan my horrific wake-up scene.

*I have to get out of here!*

I pick myself up. I have scratches all over my arms where my sleeve ends. With a hand up my face I can feel a few cuts and some dry blood.

*What happened here?*

I look for an exit around me and notice a maroon curtain at the wall. I slowly make for it, cringing at the

sight of the mangled bodies and  
trying not to step on them.

When I get to the curtain I pull it  
away and find another room with  
the same scene. Bodies curled up in  
their seats, others sprawled across  
the floor. There is a shower of light  
in the middle. I look up and notice a  
huge hole in the ceiling. And I see  
trees.

I move closer, fixing my gaze on  
the light that filters through the  
leaves and my lips part, as if  
drinking the sun. The hole stretches  
down to the bottom of the wall  
where the grass fringes in.

A jungle.

*This is my exit!*

A deep buzz sound fills the air. I stand still. *Have they found me?* The sound seems to be coming from the sky so I keep my eyes fixed at the hole. I take a step back as the buzz gets louder and all at once it appears.

I gasp.

A hovercraft flies in and stops right above the trees, right above my zenith. There is a click and the next thing I see is a black rope, quickly descending. My heart is beginning to gallop. Part of me is telling me to stay, *maybe they could be my rescuers. Maybe I could trust them.* The other part of me is screaming for me to run.



The rope comes down and accurately stops dead right in my face. I raise my hand and wrap my fingers around the material—

Sparks explode.

I pull back so fast it makes my entire body swing off balance. I grab a seat for support and snap a look at the black rope again. A figure in a white body suit is coming down, carrying a Zapper.

*An enemy soldier!*

In almost zero seconds my mind matches the image of the man in white, the Zapper and the hovercraft into a single word—death—and I am already bursting through the opening in the wall, charging my body into the wild. For

my life. I fight the urge to scream as I spear through the jungle, the long leaves licking my face.

How could I have been so stupid? I know what they are. They want nothing more than to find me and get rid of me for good.

I dash through the trees and I can hear him coming. He's close. I don't know how many they are. By the looks of things they weren't expecting to find me alive. I barely see my way through these leaves. I can only feel the ground under my feet and guess what the jungle is like ahead of me.

I glance back and a white fabric is bobbing above the green, going up and down and looking to kill me.

My heart is racing. I don't know where to go. He's too close for me to hide. I can't keep running forever.

I grit my teeth and fight the tears that are balling up in my eyes. I shouldn't do this. I shouldn't lose hope. I shouldn't—*argh!*

A sharp sting finds my back with no warning. Before I can reach the spot with my hand my legs fail me and I stumble forward, hitting the ground head-on.

I cannot move.

The wilderness will not hide me.

The ground trembles under my cheek and I know what's coming before I see it. Two white boots stop in front of me. A hand slides underneath my torso and turns me

over. The earth drops from my face and I can see past the tall trees and into the light in the sky. My heart is galloping but I can't respond. My body won't move.

I hear a click and instinctively roll my eyes to see the soldier in white, recharging his Zapper. The buzz grows in the air and my heart goes into panic mode. But the adrenaline is quickly drained as the hovercraft returns, stealing the light and casting a dark shadow over my new world. A world that I may no longer remember after I am gone.

*So this is what it's like to die.*

The hovercraft turns hazy as I blink my eyes. Everything undulates like rippling water.

The soldier in white shows no mercy as he positions his Zapper above my heart. I make a tear, letting it roll off my cheek so this new world will remember who I am. He pulls his finger back and a zap of deep purple envelopes me and with that final heartbeat, my entire world is gone.

**LOVE**

The only thing I like about Scanning is the warmth of the heat radiating from the wall and the glowing particles swirling in the air like tiny lost suns.

I'm standing in my underwear with my chin up and my arms spread out, a few feet away from the Scanner: A special glass wall, shooting artificial medicinal sunshine that's supposed to kill any germs on my skin. Pandor is a generally healthy planet and my city

is probably the most hygienic but the people who are responsible for my *not-dying* recommend that I scan every morning.

For me, bright yellow means warmth. Sharp purple means death. I don't regularly have dreams about dying so I'm not going to think about last night. I'm six blue moon's old and I can take care of what happens in my head when I sleep.

The medicinal sunshine dims out and I lower my chin, sighing to the beginning of another big day at the Major Tower. I head there every day. Sometimes for training, sometimes for the Oracle. If it's training, it's a good day. If it's the Oracle, it's a tough day. I sighed.



Today is tough.

I pick up my towel from the floor and head to my room. It's a small room with two orb lights floating in the air a few feet above my head.

Across my bed is the glass wall, giving me a nice view of the ocean and the giddy multicolored fish from an underwater vantage point.

Yes, my home is underwater. It's like a large glass box dunked in the ocean. The interior design is beautiful and simple. Finished with plush couches with the softest upholstery, orb lights in every corner, a small bedroom that I wish they made bigger, a Scanning room, Private gym, living room and an unnecessary traditional kitchen.

No one cooks food anymore these days. All our food is manufactured, transformed and then stored in cubes we call Metros.

You put the cube in a Converter machine which resembles a microwave (seriously, is anyone still using that?) that converts the cube back into the food it was.

I put on my sweatshirt and shorts and head to the kitchen where I'm prescribed to take one AD4 cube and a glass of protein no-fat milk.

Sometimes I feel like Pandor is controlling us, even to the very things we eat. I'm sure the Metro cube was an idea to inhibit us in some way. At least we are still allowed to eat as much fruit as we

like and thankfully, it's illegal to cube fruits.

Some maniacs still cube them anyway to transport them in bulk. Then they convert them in secret and you buy them in the stores without knowing they aren't completely natural anymore. You can tell by the taste. There's a plastic feeling to it. It's not authentic.

I put the cube in the Converter and punch start. It takes two seconds and a zap of light for the door to open and my breakfast to slide out.

Bacon, eggs and a block of cheese. Not so bad, I suppose. I add an orange from the fruit fridge and

have my meal at the counter while a huge shark stares at me. I ignore it. They don't seem so intimidating when you get used to them. I get these odd feelings like they want to talk to me. I hope talking to sharks is not one of my strengths.

As a Lebra, I have four strengths. One: I am the only person in my entire planet who can communicate with the Oracle. Which basically means I'm subconsciously memorizing the entire history of my planet. I had to be taken away from my parents when I was only three blue moon's old and trained every single day of my life. I am being prepared to lead the Elders in ruling the planet one day. Don't get me

wrong, the whole thing sucks. Trust me, you don't want to be chosen.

Two: I can easily create force fields and energy balls that Rhiannon calls Orbs, better than most people. I don't really believe that because I still suck badly at it. It's a good thing Rhiannon is patient.

Three: They say I was born a fighter. I don't know how that applies as a strength. Rhiannon still kicks my butt during training. But at least I score in the Amnesia Trials.

Four: I am emotionally unavailable. According to the Elders it means I'm not supposed to fall in love. They can't risk me losing focus

or getting hurt. That means my social life is a small circle. My family barely fits in. And about the no boyfriend part? I'm actively hormonal so that's not a pretty position to be in.

I'm barely through my breakfast when a speaker in the ceiling comes on with an electronic voice message:

### **Rhiannon wishes to teleport.**

"Permit," I say to an invisible mic I have never yet found and then there's a buzz in the Teleport Chamber. I gobble what's left on my plate and leave the room to find Rhiannon standing in my living

room in a bright yellow track suit with white stripes. He's a quick mover.

"Hello, Myla. Had your breakfast?"

"Yup."

"Good. We have the Oracle today and you look like we need to double your Orb sessions."

"I know. The Orb seems so hard."

He smiles, "I know. But you'll get it."

I walk over to him and we head back to the Teleport. We stand under the dark low ceiling and he taps a few digits on the keypad. In a zap as instant as electricity we are gone.

Teleporting is like watching your body erase itself from toe to crown. The enjoyable part of it is when you get poured out like water from the small Ejector in the next Port.

It happens really quick but if you focus hard enough, you can feel yourself change into something else that you can't explain.

Rhiannon slides his arm behind my back as we walk out of the Port and into the streets of Doris, the capital of our planet.



The city is intertwined with nature, being built *upon* a jungle with high rise buildings marching up the hill and appearing above the trees. Our pathways fly over the canopy. People on Air-scooters buzz about the city. They're the folk who don't trust Teleportation technology and would prefer something more mechanical. They're too afraid to accept change. It's only a matter of time before they realize the limits of their resistance.

The city is landmarked with pink and purple pyramids that glow during the night, a reminder of the Kings and Elders who rule us. The people I hate to be associated with.

I walk close to the railings all the time, sliding my hand over the steel and peering down below at the treetops.

I pick at the leaves, reaching over to me from the trees. A pulse zaps into my fingers and sinks into my chest. Like always, a strong heartbeat follows and then a steady beating.

"That's our music. Everything in Pandor falls under the same beat," says Rhiannon.

"You've told me that before." I shift my gaze back to the path ahead and I take the lead again. Rhiannon follows. "Like a thousand times."

"They used to call me nature boy back in Engagement."

"Guess I'm not the only one who grew up without any friends."

*I shouldn't have said that.*

I know I've struck a tough chord. I look up at the Major Tower to pretend I don't care. But there's not much I can hide from Rhiannon.

He puts his hand over my shoulder and I stop in my tracks. I turn and his deep black eyes shepherd me, "It will be better. Trust me."

He turns away and we fall back into pace. The Major Tower spears the sky as the tallest building on the planet. Hundreds of stories tall. You can see it from anywhere.

My mother told me stories about our ancestors who tried to build a

tower to reach the stars. If they were here today, they would be impressed.

Rhiannon and I climb a few stone steps. The sun is now breaking into threads of sunshine across the edge of the massive tower. We stop in front of a stone wall engraved with a round metallic door.

With a wave of a hand and two beeps the door slides apart into five different segments, giving us way. We escape the heat and stroll into a Tower only so few are allowed to enter. The doors close behind our backs, leaving us in the dark. The type that looks like blue. We stand in a low ceiling tunnel with soldiers lined up on either side, dressed in

black with infrared goggles and holding Zappers.

Their chins are always up but as soon as we stride forward each one of them shifts their gaze towards me and Rhiannon.

The soldiers are not exactly real. Pandor has a culture of cloning people. All of these soldiers are controlled by a tiny chip in their brains. They act human but they're not. And even though I know that's true, it can sometimes be hard to believe. I've been around clones a lot more than most people. Every time I have Amnesia Trials that's what we use.

"You seem to linger," says Rhiannon.

"Their weapons," I say.

"What about them?"

My dream haunts me again. The Zappers in their hands were the same used by my enemy to kill me. I haven't told Rhiannon before. I wouldn't bother. It's not the first time I've dreamed of my death.

"The Golgorians used the same weapons."

"If you're accusing the Elders of being copy-cats then right you are," he grins. Then he slowly raises his hand to shield his eyes from the incoming light.

He points ahead, "To the Vine!" A huge shaft stands in the center of the Tower, carrying six elevators around it, each of them glowing

blue on the outside. Rhiannon waves his hand again, the system quickly scans his identity and the door slides down. We ease ourselves into the metallic elevator floor and the door slides up again, displaying a vibrant and gorgeous view of the sea waves rising up the beach.

It's too risky to build the elevator shaft on the side of the Tower where we could see the view of the city and landscapes through a window, so we improvised: cameras on the outside and a door that doubles as a screen on the inside.

"The Oracle," says Rhiannon. The elevator begins to move up. At the same time it circles the shaft like a vine plant. That's why practically

everyone here calls the elevator system the Vine. In fact, we say it so much it's become official. For some reason I am yet to know, Rhiannon is in love with it.

"I thought the system is telepathic?"

"It is," says Rhiannon. "But I have doubts. Last time I was thinking about the Training Room and it took me down to the Hub. I prefer speaking my thoughts to make sure they are heard loud and clear."

I laugh. "No. You're just a confused man. It must be boring to put up with me every day."

Rhiannon smiles, "Extremely. However, I also have to put up with the Elders and with Cinder."



I roll my eyes, "Everyone has to put up with Cinder."

The Vine is not very fast. Or perhaps I feel that way because the Oracle is in the heart of the Tower. And half way up the Tower is still way, way, way up there, you know?

I lean back against a bar and watch the display of our virtual scenery change. Now the screen is fully dominated by the sea and her floating houses with the waves crashing against their windows and fish flying above their balconies. I wish I had a floating house.

*No you can't. You're a Lebra. You know what that means...*

I can't be out in the open like a bird in a shooting range. A house at

sea is a stupid mistake. It will make me a target so easy the enemy would guess it's a trap. That's why I live underwater. It's still cool though. I get artificial sun baths every morning so I should be okay.

Our elevator continues to round the vine and when it stops, the beautiful ocean, shimmering with the sun is swallowed under our feet as the door gives way. Rhiannon takes the first step out.

This is a high tech lab. Scientists scurry around and more clone soldiers patrol the room. In the center of it is a massive chamber, rising in a solid Hexagon.

"Hello, Ria," says Cinder, quickly showing up with his favorite

Nanotop in his hands that he uses to record almost everything about me. My progress, my skills, how much I've eaten, my sleep. And annoyingly even my periods. And to think we used to go to the same Engagement lessons when we were kids, where he would pick on me. It just drives me nuts.

"It's Rhiannon."

"We know. So how's Myla doing?"

I cross my arms, "Ahem, you could ask me for once, you know?"

Cinder chuckles, his eyes all over his Nanotop, "No need. I always know." He holds up his device and various charts are on the screen with my auburn hair claiming a

portion on the side. As I zero in on the chart labels I gap, astounded.

"You're even reading my hair pigment levels? That's impressively obsessive."

He pulls his Nanotop out of reach and puts his fake smile forward, "This way now."

Cinder leads us to the Hexagon Chamber while downsizing his Nanotop to a biscuit and tucking it in his back pocket. A large man in a robe stands outside the Chamber. His white beard almost swallows his face. This is the leading Elder. This is Artemis. Beside him are Phoebe and Thea, who in my opinion should be mom of the planet.

"Myla," says Artemis. "Doing well?"

"I am."

"Then step inside."

Rhiannon leads me to a spot next to Cinder. I stand on a steel grating and instantly a path of blue light illuminates from under my feet, straight to the Hexagon. Cinder hands me my Kronite Warrior belt—an extremely rare asset that I treat as a pet—and I wrap it around my waist.

I take a deep breath and gaze ahead as the Hexagon opens up with a hiss. Rhiannon whispers in my ear to calm me down. "Just keep your eyes on Phoebe. You'll be fine."

I almost laugh because Rhiannon and I used to call him bean-head behind his back a lot. It feels wrong in the guts to make fun of Phoebe 'cause he's a really cool guy. I wish we could have names for Cinder. *Gosh! Why did the Universe make him so perfect?*

"Off you go," says Rhiannon. I stroll over the glowing path toward a metallic structure inside the Hexagon, resembling a giant cage. Two green laser beams strike my eyes to scan me. If anyone else were standing where I am they would be smoke by now.

Once I'm in, the Hexagon shuts itself and the cage opens up, revealing a bright sphere floating in

the air, pulsing between orange and white in steady beats. When it's orange you can see lines engraved in it that form pentagons, turning it into a beehive. The white flash is too bright and covers it up.

In the time I am able to recap my environment my hair has begun to float off my shoulders. The entire room is sizzling with energy. I raise my hand and my Warrior belt activates, sending threads of Kronite into the fabric of my sweatshirt and shorts, forming guards on my elbows and kneecaps. It meshes with my clothes to protect me if I'm ever under attack. The Elders proposed I wear it as often as possible to allow the Kronite to

grow accustomed to me. Heights,  
curves and all.

As my palm approaches the  
orange ball in the air I shut my eyes  
and let the instincts guide. I make  
contact and grit my teeth to brace  
myself for the part I hate the most.



### 3

A million emotions and a million pictures pound through my head. All at once. My body shudders as the Oracle takes over. The veins in my forehead bulge. I feel like my brain is under attack. It's like trying to trap a waterfall in a single drop of water.

Being a Lebra with many strengths has never made this experience easy for me. I can't tell you what I see. I see too much. I see everything. It's like going to the past

and being in every corner of Pandor at the same time. There is nothing to hold on to. Countless memories and voices crash inside of me, like an avalanche into my subconscious mind, where all history goes.

I feel hollow. Like a tunnel. The emotions of thousands of Pandorians thunder. Battle cries, laughs of the dead, love, hatred, pain and loss. They keep coming. Faster and faster like the speed of light and I scream.

Screaming is a normal part of this. It doesn't happen occasionally. But when I feel swamped I need to let it out. I arch my back, lean my head backwards and scream up. My hand feels glued to the Oracle so I can't

let go if it hurts. My brain doesn't want any more of this but it won't stop.

I have fainted a couple of times. Especially when I was a beginner. I wouldn't want that to happen again. Artemis is always expecting so much from me. It would be embarrassing to let him down after working up a fairly good reputation in the last blue moon.

And there's also Rhiannon. I always want to make him proud. I bite down. Just a little more.

I no longer feel my body. I feel locked inside my own mind. Like a prisoner. Surrounded by so many things I don't want to see.

Surprisingly, it all stops abruptly. Like someone turned off the switch. I am left in the black. The darkness slowly drifts towards me. I can feel my body again. The veins in my head relax and I gasp desperately for a good breath.

As quick as a spark, battleships appear in space around a cloudy darkness, circular, and hovering over—

"NO!"

I fall back to a cushion on the floor with my heart in my throat. My chest sinks from what I've just seen. My pulse races over my already exhausted body.

The Hexagon opens up and Rhiannon and Cinder rush in for me.

"Myla, are you okay? You're panicking!" Rhiannon kneels beside me and puts his hand around my head. I roll my head back into his arms, seeing Cinder looking down. I gasp again, trying to recall what I saw.

"She saw something," says Cinder.

"Is that true?"

I reach for my voice but it seems to be missing. He takes my hand and I find some strength to say yes.

"What did you see?"

Cinder calls back through the door, "We need Energizer One. Hurry!"

My eyes rolls back at Rhiannon,  
almost blank.

"Myla, what did you see?" he  
repeats. "Don't black out now. You  
have to remember what you saw!"

I feel confused. Lost in the  
moment and trying to find myself.  
In five minutes everything I saw will  
be completely forgotten and passed  
into my subconscious self. I will  
have barely any access to them until  
I am a complete Lebra. And that is  
no time soon.

"Myla?"

"Battle..." it takes such an effort to  
put a word out. I gasp quickly. I  
may have only one more chance to  
say something that makes sense. A  
list of words start jumping inside of

my head and I have to choose one.  
Wisely. My mouth gaps open, in  
need of air and my memory is  
slipping away.

"Yes. Battle and...?"

I stare back at him, losing myself  
into the world of blurs. Before his  
face fades away I find his deep black  
eyes and the right word finally  
clicks.

"... space."

A man in a green tunic, slides  
beside Cinder and places a face  
mask over me. The air fills in quick.  
It's so good I can almost taste it.

Rhiannon's mouth gawks as he  
connects the words. He knows what  
I've seen. But I can't read the  
expression on his face anymore.

Everything I see smudges together  
and all feeling goes away. It's like  
falling asleep.



From here the clouds don't seem so far away. My arms are drawn up with my palms together, my body stretched into an arrow.

"Okay, pull it in," says Rhiannon.

I focus on my core as I pull in my lower muscles, releasing my arms down and then raising them up again, drawing the energy into my hands. I bring my foot up to my other knee, and unclasp my hands. A magnetic aura begins to surround

me. I can feel it leaving my body. I shut my eyes to focus.

*Please don't stop like last time.*

"That's great!" Rhiannon claps.

I have a smile on my face. I am creating an orb and I'm getting a little better at it. When I know I've got it right I open my eyes and see the proud look on his face.

Orbing is like having a flower blossom inside of you. You have to channel it out and express it through your body. You have to relax and use the right muscles at the right time to direct the orb into any expression you desire.

I started out with *Mountain* which requires stretching into the sky with your palms facing each other. When

you feel the energy building up  
there's that climax you want to look  
for. Then it finally breaks out and  
you can make of it what you want.

When I first began practicing  
three blue moons ago, I thought  
orbs were ball-like force fields that  
surround you like a bubble. They're  
quite different. They do come in  
energy balls. Orbs have no real  
color.

But they have a peculiar effect.  
Orbs make things blurry. The air  
around me is sizzling with static,  
distorting the beautiful background  
into a haze. Even I seem a bit  
surreal to myself, like a hologram in  
the water.

Rhiannon pulls out a spoon from a makeshift table we use for fruit salads and tosses it to me. It bounces off my orb with sparks. He picks another spoon and does the same. My orb protects me again and I bite my lip. *I want to have some fun here.*

I raise both hands up like a fork and draw the magnetic feeling between my palms, sucking my orb into a ball and thrusting it at Rhiannon.

"Woah!" he dodges the blow and my orb smashes into the makeshift table. It explodes into pieces. Porcelain, wood and our fruit salad in shreds.

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry!"

Rhiannon laughs aside, "Brilliant, Myla."

"Thanks. But I just ruined our lunch."

He walks over to me and touches my cheek. He's a head taller than me. "You did great. And we can always get more fruit." He smiles, then looks over my head. I turn back and view the incredible landscape. This is my Outdoor Training Ground. It's an expanse platform and is three quarters high up the Tower. From here everything looks small. Except for the trees. They simply resemble a green carpet. The canopy marches down the city to the long beach. The massive jungle trees on the far right

almost seem to reach into the clouds. Their treetops are covered in a thick fog that's been there for as long as I can remember. Towards the left the hills roll themselves into peaked mountains, where three pink glowing pyramids landmark the scene—home to the Elders.

Across the sky is the dome of our sister planet, Arius. I once had a friend. Her name is Xena. We attended Engagement together but after I was chosen her family moved her to Arius.

"I don't have many friends anymore."

I turn back to Rhiannon. He's moving to the bench by the railings. I follow his lead and sit across him.

He tucks my hair behind my neck  
and traces my scalp with his finger.

"It will be better."

"I don't know. You say that a lot. I  
don't know what's cool about being  
a Lebra. It's like I'm the Elders's  
puppet. I wish I were in a different  
planet. Like Arius or Heamus."

"And where would I be?"

"Living next door."

"So I'd still have to put up with  
you smashing our fruit salads.  
Brilliant."

I laugh. Rhiannon always turns  
the tables around.

"Pandor can suck."

"You mean Artemis?"

"Yes." They have programmed me  
to please him but it doesn't mean I

like him. After a tiresome battle with the Oracle he ordered Rhiannon to give me an Orb session.

"I got a plan," says Rhiannon, "Why don't we go to Earth?"

"Ha! Are you kidding me? Of all places? There are way better planets to run off to."

"I know. But you have an uncle there."

"And I can't understand why he would punish himself like that."

"What do you have against Earth?"

"They're like so old school. I learned about them in Engagement. They had a global war. Twice! Imagine if Pandor fought against



itself. And to think they did it twice!  
Twice? They're maniacs. They  
barely care about their real  
problems."

"That's some opinion."

"It's a Lebra's opinion," I nod,  
"They need to get real."

I lean back and cross my arms. I  
love the idea of running away with  
Rhiannon. But I know that will  
never happen.

A bright light appears in the sky  
and shoots like a laser up through  
the clouds.

I sit up, startled. "What's that?"

In a heartbeat, the sky explodes  
into a blanket of light, traveling  
across the sky all the way to the

green hills and glowing pyramids at the horizon. "Are we Shielding?"

We never do that unless there's some real danger. The last time it happened, I was chosen. On my initiation ceremony we stood at the base of the Tower and watched with cameras and screens how the turret of the Tower bulged into a beautiful bright light that beamed toward the sky and illuminated the entire planet within a flash.

They Shielded the planet to hide me from the enemies. Once I knew I was a Lebra my brain waves transmitted that awareness through space-time and anyone with the right tracker could find me. It's like how the Vine knows where to take

you by reading the thoughts you air to it via telepathy.

To prevent my brain waves that carry my identity from escaping into space where our enemies would find them, they put up a shield. Plus, it also serves as a barrier between the dimensions of the Golgorians and our own. It's a weird and strange thing to say but the Golgorians are long gone and dead. They no longer exist in our dimension. But they're still out there. I'll explain that later. Right now Rhiannon is trying to avoid my gaze.

"What's happening, Rhiannon?"

His eyes blink and there's a subtle drop in his character, as if a veil was

pulled back from his hidden concerns.

"Did I see something? Did I say something after the Oracle?"

"Listen. We don't want you to freak out."

"Tell me what happened, Rhiannon!"

"We thought it was best to not let you worry. Everything is under control."

"Well now I know something is wrong. We just shielded Pandor again —"

Another giant flash explodes in the sky and I jolt, spinning around. Arius is now covered in a dazzling radiance of its own, spreading over the planet and expanding into space

where it fades out. The rays of the second Shielding reach our city, sparkling on our infrastructure. I turn back to Rhiannon with slits for eyes. "Two Shieldings!?"

"Not two. One each."

I cross my arms. My heart is galloping and my Warrior belt releases the Kronite back into my fabric, creating an armor once more. It does that when I sense danger. Or when someone's trying to zap me. Rhiannon knows by the Kronite that I am not walking away without an answer. I look him straight. "What's happening? Tell me what I saw."

He sighs, "Okay. When you finished with the Oracle, you were

blacking out. And you were trying to say something."

"What did I say?"

"Two words. Battle and space."

My chest sinks and my eyes jump to the sky, "They're here!"

"No. Maybe not yet. We scanned the near space and we couldn't find trace of them. We Shielded again as an extra precaution. You're safe."

"I don't understand. How do you expect to scan for something that is almost not even real!?"

"We're not looking for the battleships. You know it's not about that. It's about Stretaka."

The name turns me cold. In Engagement we learned about the Great War between Pandor and

Golgoria. Sometimes I catch glimpses of it from the Oracle. Capricorn was Lebra at the time. He led Pandor to victory. Some say it was the biggest war of the universe. Entire planets were annihilated. Golgoria was taking down one after the other. Arius and Heamus were next. Pandor stepped in to fight back with help from the Meteorans.

What made the Golgorians invincible was something that no planet has yet to replicate. They made a mind. They say it resembled a gigantic brain, hidden in one of the battleships, perfect in every way. A former leader named Stretaka had died during the beginning of the war and they

preserved his brain. His ability to think and plan, to search and destroy was like none other. They searched for a way to continue his genius. And that resulted into something bigger than all of us.

The mind of Stretaka controlled the Golgorian warships and their attacks. It was far superior than anyone ever imagined. Perfect at evading attacks. If you've ever played a game against a computer at its best you'd know what I mean. But programmed machines have loopholes. Minds at certain levels are just no match.

There was no way to defeat the Golgorians with such a weapon. No matter how much was sacrificed.



After a long battle, Capricorn finally found a way. It probably wouldn't destroy the Golgorians but it would lock them away.

Capricorn sacrificed himself in the plan that required him to give up his life and his strengths. He could change the dimensions of any space as long as he was there. Dead or alive.

He opened a portal to a new dimension in the heart of the battle and locked himself away with Stretaka. In a whirlpool of darkness all the Golgorian battleships were sucked away, along with some of our own. The Great War was won.

For a while.

Now, the Golgorians are back. They're still caged in the darkness of their other-worldly dimension but they have power to step out. The good side is that they won't last an hour on any planet without disintegrating and dying for good. This dimension is not compatible for them. The bad side is they will be insanely powerful.

Rhiannon notices my distress. He puts his arm behind me and leads me back into the Tower. "Let's get you home."

"I don't like this," I tell him.

"I know. I'll take you home.

Okay?"

"Okay."

The scariest thing about Stretaka is all about him. The Golgorians may disintegrate. But he won't. He's a mind. His essence is mental activity. He can go where he wishes, without limitation, just as much as x-rays would penetrate iron. The only thing stopping him is the Shield. I know he wants me. I know why he wants me.

Stretaka of all things, desires a body of great potential. A Lebra would be a perfect match. Me and him. We are compatible. But I will die. And Stretaka will return.

I get to my home under the ocean. I'm lying on my bed, over the cream covers. My head over my pillow and gazing at the fish out the window.

The Lunabees change color in the water. Flashing from yellow to red to blue. Sometimes they flock in the same color, sometimes they get confused and glow out of sync. It's beautiful either way.

There are dark square patches high up. Shadows of the floating houses. Now that I know Stretaka is close and Rhiannon and the Elders can't fool me into calmness, it feels quite fortunate to have a safe home underwater.

"You know when they start to strike, my house won't get blown up. And I have enough Metros to last me a long time here. Should have realized this home was the perfect hideout," I'm speaking

aimlessly. More to myself. "Even got myself some sunshine in the other room."

Rhiannon strokes my arm.  
"Nothing is coming to blow anyone's house."

"You're like Cinder. You treat me like I'm little. I'm six blue moons now. I can handle the truth."

"You shouldn't expect the worst. Your feelings are wrong."

"It's not just a feeling. It's my gut."

Rhiannon sucks in deeply. His chest heaves in the corner of my eye as I continue to stare out into the ocean. It's calm and it flows where it wants to go. No Elders to tell it what to do or what to eat. Or how to live.

"I want a boyfriend. Before Stretaka takes me."

Rhiannon is quite. He presses his lips and taps his foot on the floor. It makes the orb lights flicker and move over his head. He's told me many times the reasons why I can't go on dates like my old friends. The our-lives-will-be-at-constant-risk excuse.

"I'm tired of your reasons," I tell him. "Life is short."

"I know you had a bad dream. Cinder told me about your sleep pattern last night. Did it involve yourself dying?"

I stay quiet.

"You got Zapped?"

My lips part, "Yeah. But it wasn't in Pandor."

"You should sleep. I'll be in the living room for a few hours in case you need me, okay?"

"Just go."

Rhiannon slides off the bed and opens my room door. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight. And if you see Artemis. Tell him that I hate him."

The door shuts and his footsteps disappear. I roll back onto my side. My pillow contains a small speaker that produces ambient sounds of the moving fish. An old gift from my father. It's not the best lullaby but it's good enough to make me forget this pathetic world.

You know, maybe Earth wouldn't  
be so bad.



I wonder what happens in  
between the moment when you lie  
under covers waiting for the world  
to disappear and the moment when  
you find yourself in a new one.

The trees are tall and it feels like a  
day before autumn. I'm sitting in a  
meadow, my hands gripping the  
grass, gazing out at the rising  
mountains. A stream of water  
reflects my face and like Cinder  
would say, most of it is hiding under  
my hair. I'm alone even in my

dreams. Could my life be more pathetic?

I would love to scream but then I'd wake up. And I wouldn't want to return to Pandor. These woods are calm and make me feel like I can do anything I want. No Elders. No Cinder. And no Oracle.

There is a pain inside. It will come back even stronger when I wake. I don't want to think of it. I want to believe in a place like this. Even though I know it's not real. Right now it is. And a moment like this is all I need.

"Hey!"

My blood runs cold. I'm motionless. *Is someone else here?*

Footsteps crunch the leaves  
behind me and I slowly rise up,  
keeping my gaze still on the stream  
below. I do not turn around.

"Hey!" he calls again.

I am frozen.

*That sounds like a boy.*

My feet are planted on the  
ground. I dread the thought of  
twisting around.

"What's up?"

*Is he talking to me?*

The footsteps are so close they're  
making my heart jump every time  
the leaves crackle. I feel his motion  
stop behind me and he is there in  
the water. Right beside my face.  
With his dark hair and piercing  
eyes.

"Well, are you gonna turn around?"

I rotate steadily until I am facing him. For real now.

"There you go! Wasn't so hard was it?"

I open my mouth to speak but the words are missing. *I am with a boy!* *I'm with a GUY!* I end up laughing out of disbelief.

"What's funny?"

I stare back at him. A second shot at his gorgeous, striking eyes. "Who are you?"

"A boy."

I laugh again, "I can see that. I was hoping for something like... um, a name?"

"Blake."

"Blake," I repeat his name on my lips, tasting it.

"What's yours?"

I smile. It's been ages since someone ever asked me that.

"Myla." *On second thought I'm not sure there was ever such an age in my life.*

"Myla!" he says with a grin.

"What's up with that?"

"That's a wonderful name. Myla. I love it."

My cheeks are changing color,  
"Your name is nice too."

"No it ain't. It's just a name. Like a *name, name.*"

"Well, Blake. What are you doing in my dream?"

"Your dream?" his brows jump.

"Yes. My dream."

"No no no," he waves his hand,

"This is my dream."

"What are you talking about? I was here first."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Been around for hours."

"Waiting on me?"

My eyes mellow. "I don't know."

Blake smiles and takes my hand. He's making it feel warm. He turns me around, our eyes back on the stream.

"We look good together, don't we?"

I cough a laugh. This can't be happening. I can't be hearing this right now. I don't want to believe this only to wake up with the gut-

wrenching feeling of denial. But for now, for the moment, there's nothing else that matters more than this boy who is holding my hand.

"Yes," my lips curve, "We do look awesome together."

My heart swells and I want to scream. It's a good thing I've got long hair to cover the huge blush on my cheeks.

He makes me sit down with him.  
"Tell me about you."

"I'm not very interesting."

"I don't think so. Anyone with a name like Myla must be interesting."

"You don't want to hear my story."

"Is it sad?" He strokes my hair and I feel electricity. The static is on

my skin and my hair is up. Blake looks down at me, reading me.

"You... you're a caged bird."

My lips don't part. I pull them in because it's true.

"You can't fly like you want to."

I stare back at him, "Is it obvious?"

"It's on your face."

"You want to know about me?"

"Yeah."

"Okay," I take a deep breath. I've never told anyone my story before.

"I don't have anyone to talk to really. No one's that interested in me anyway. Except for my trainer, Rhiannon . And my family... I talk to them sometimes... or never.



"I used to be a normal girl. Until I was chosen to be the next Lebra. After that everyone I knew and loved were ripped out of the picture."

"Sorry, what's a Lebra?"

"You don't know? Where are you from? Arius?"

"I'm from Alaska."

"And where the hell is that?"

Blake gives me a funny look, shaking his head like Alaska was the most obvious place in the universe.

"You don't know? Ever seen an atlas?"

"Of course I have. On my atlas there is no place called Alaska."

His eyes meet mine. "Quit fooling around."

"I'm not fooling around. There is no such place as Alaska!"

Blake turns back to the stream and let's his hand drop from my hair.

"Oh!" he bumps his forehead with his palm and then bursts out laughing. "Of course. It's just a dream. You don't exist. You're not real. No wonder you're not making any sense."

Those words are like rocks hitting my heart. I fold my arms and ignore his obnoxious behavior. "You're so stupid."

"You know I can make you kiss me. Do anything I want. You're not real or anything."

I shoot him hawk eyes. "I will pummel you to the bottom of this stream and tie you to a rock and stab you a thousand times before you drown, just try to do that."

"Take it easy, Myla. I thought we were getting along."

"Until you started acting like a total jerk. And by the way I am very much real. You're the impostor."

"Hey," he puts one hand on my shoulder. "I like you. You and your fiery hair. I hope I get to meet you in my dreams often."

I snort, "There is no meeting you again. Like you said, this place isn't real. It's just a dream. And when we wake up we'll see whose dream this really is."

"It's a deal! But how will we tell if this is real or not?"

I bite my lip and turn back to my reflection in the stream. A crazy idea makes me grin.

"What?" says Blake.

I get up and walk behind a large tree. "Give me a minute. Close your eyes."

"Okay."

I undress and pull off my panties. This is crazy. If I wake up without my underwear on then I will know. I get back to Blake. "Here. Wake up with this and there's no denying it. This place is real."

He stands up and when he sees my black panties his face cringes. "Seriously?"

"What do you have to worry about? It's just a dream, right?"

He nods, "Yeah, right." He slides his hand in his pocket and pulls out a small device with a screen.

Listening buds are attached to it.

"You're giving me a radio? Isn't that from the museum or something?"

"No, silly. It's an iPod Touch. My mother got it for me a few weeks ago. Since it's so valuable and because this place doesn't exist, I'll let you have it... until I wake up."

I take his so-called iPod. It almost looks like a minimized Nanotop, just a little thicker. "So what does this toy do?"

"If a caged bird can't fly. A caged bird will sing. Maya Angelou."

"Who's she?"

"She's... forget it. There's a ton of music in there to sing to."

"Music?"

"Don't tell me you don't know what music is!"

"I do. We just don't have much music at Pandor, you know? Most of it is just hypnotic tones to give our brains the right frequency to be more productive and creative in our work."

"Oh, boy!" he rolls his eyes up.

"I know. It's boring. The beats sound like they're drilling into your ear."

He puts his hands around my face, my panties locked in his fingers and I swear this would be super weird if it was real.

"You need help."

"I know. Will you do Maya Angelou a favor and set this caged bird free?"

"Sure." His face moves in and my heart accelerates so fast I gasp and my eyes pry themselves open. I'm on my bed and my hand is over my heart.

*Was he about to kiss me?*

I take deep breaths to calm myself while glancing at the glowing Lunabees out the window. My hand leaves my chest and I feel something smooth slipping under

my palms. I look down — *Woah!* — and jolt back so hard that my back bumps into the wall. My heart is racing. The device glows brightly into my face as a string of words slide across the screen:

*Play With My Hair.*



The alarm blares on but Blake resists the urge to wake up. Her face is a blur. He holds on to all the details. She is quickly slipping away from his hands. The trees behind her have turned into green clouds, bubbling around her face. Before he can kiss her she is gone.

Blake is off the ground. Suspended away. He shuts his eyes to memorize whatever is left to see and for a moment, he is able to hold

her image until Sammi comes barking on his bed, licking his hand.

When he doesn't stir he gives Blake a gentle bite and he bolts up into a sitting position.

"Sammi!"

The alarm sounds from a flying saucer hanging from the ceiling. It's the song *Blackout* by the band *Stolen Projects*. He reaches up to turn it off.

"What's up, Sammi?"

He strokes the dog's back as it turns around and bounces off his bed. When the song is over Sammi knows it's time to get going.

Yawning, Blake turns to the bedside stool where he keeps a glass of water. He takes it down and tosses

his legs out of bed, sitting on the edge and gazing out the window.

*Some dream.*

Her face is still grilled in his head. Her long, cascading auburn hair that looks like it's about to burst into flames. And her face. So cute you would never want to remove your hands if you ever touched it.

*Blake, you need to forget this.*

He reaches under his pillow for his iPod. *Blackout* is his song of choice if he ever needs to clear his mind and get hyped. He pats his bed underneath the pillow, but doesn't seem to find it.

"Sammi!" His dog jogs back into the room, "Did you take my iPod again?"

He jumps on the bed and sniffs under his pillow.

"It's not there, boy, I just checked."

But he finds something else and tosses it to Blake with his nose. Right there he is under arrest. He turns pale. Sammi backs away, leaping off the bed and leaving black panties spread out under the covers.

*Myla.*

He picks it up and holds it out.

"Holy hell!"

Blake shakes his head in disbelief and rolls out of bed in his boxers.

*No way!*

Sammi scurries over to the desk.

"No boy, leave the computers alone!"

He doesn't get to him soon enough before he punches on the iMac and his mom is staring straight at him in a video call with the black panties in his hand.

"Hey, baby! How's your first day of the new school year? I'm so sorry I can't be there right now for you. I had an awesome weekend with my friend Shirley and..."

"Mom, give me a minute," Blake spins around and throw the panties on the bed. *Hope she didn't see that one.*

Sammi barks at the iMac.

"Sammi, be quiet," he runs over to the closet. "No barking at mom."

His mom continues to ramble on the screen, "... Blake, I hope you have everything ready for school. Just talked to Sherri's mom. They're back in town but you gotta take it easy on them. They've had a rough summer—"

"Mom, just a minute. I'm putting on a shirt!"

"... you're my boy and when I get home we'll have lots to catch up on."

"I know. I know."

He crosses over to his bed and throws the bed sheets over the panties.

"Blake, you have to tell me everything about that!"

He spins to the screen and bites his teeth. She's seen it.

"Mom, it's weird—too weird actually, you won't believe it!"

"I'm getting worried about how you're doing."

Sammi barks again and he bends down and urges him to shut up.

"There's nothing to worry about."

"You probably miss your friends. Perhaps a girlfriend under my nose that you haven't been able to tell me about yet. I'm sorry if I made you mad about Samantha. She was weird honestly. You have to admit. But if you're going to have girls in the house when I'm away..."

"Okay, mom listen. It's not like that," he reaches under the covers

and pulls out the black piece of cloth, holding it in front of the web cam. "I didn't have any parties at home. I crash out with my buds."

His mom doesn't seem to listen. She continues her rant, her eyes fixed straight ahead at the panties dangling in the air. "I know you got your hormones. You're growing up and you've got the whole house to yourself now that I'm in India for these few weeks..."

"Blake, I know this is a weird way to have this conversation. But I just thought you needed it. Especially now that you're going to be back to school with a lot more of your friends and those crazy girls. I don't know what you do in your room and



with who. That's entirely your business. I can't stop you. But I just want you to be careful."

"Mom, I know what I'm doing. And I think we've actually spoken about this before."

"I know I've bored you with this topic countless times."

*Oh my God.*

"Listen. This is different. I didn't have a girl spend the night here. At least, not in reality."

"... you're the only son I have. I love you a lot..."

"I know. But will you listen to —"he stops in mid-sentence. His mother keeps talking and he realizes it's not a live call. *She just*

*sent me a previously recorded video.*

He throws the panties into his open closet and breathes a wave of relief. But when he locks the closet shut and remembers what he thought he was saying to my mother, he realizes he's admitted the crazy truth.

*My iPod is missing.*

*The black underwear from a girl I saw in my dreams is lying inside my closet.*

*Matty and Sherri will shit bricks when they hear this.*

The device is in my hands.  
Glowing into my face and begging  
me to touch the arrow button in the  
middle, just above the photo of a  
girl facing away from me, toward a  
yellow wall. Her back and her long  
chestnut hair that stretch to the  
bottom of the photo is all I can see  
of her.

The words *Play With My Hair -  
Holly Mae* slide over from end to  
end. As I stare down at this so  
called iPod, I feel as if everything in

the world has paused to pay  
attention to what I've just found.

*Quit staring, just tap the arrow!*

With my pulse pounding in my  
fingers I reach for the arrow and it  
turns into two short parallel lines...  
the iPod comes to life. First,  
transmitting the sounds of ocean  
waves and tides splashing on a  
beach of some unknown location.  
Then the sound of sea gulls in the  
air, followed by a breeze and all this  
is just preparing me for the most  
magical part:

*Beats!*

They are so light and graceful. It  
feels like stars falling to my  
bedroom floor. I plug the ear buds  
in my ears and insert it in the iPod's

jack, as if I were listening to  
Hypnotic tones that the Elders have  
prepared for me. But it's different.  
What I am hearing right now is  
something completely different.  
And precious. A woman's voice fills  
in my ears and she sounds so  
friendly that I want to know her.  
Her words dance through the beats  
like a river streaming through the  
rocks. Everything fits. Everything is  
perfect. It's the graceful architecture  
of real music, filling my ears for the  
first time.

*Your beautiful face*  
*Rippling in the water*  
*Your gorgeous eyes*  
*Dancing in my mind*

I am on my feet in my room and I  
am swept away in a tidal wave of  
magic, hope, beautiful sounds,  
love... like I accidentally stumbled  
upon a great treasure on a stranded  
island.

*I wanna touch you, touch you  
Turn me around  
I wanna kiss your lips  
And squeeze you in the arm  
I wanna love you like you've  
never felt love before...*

And the beats that come bashing  
in steal me away into a world where  
only feelings exist. An avalanche of  
joy, a hurricane of desire and a river

of truth streaming out of my eyes in tears. I've never heard music before but I don't care. All I know now is that I'll never stop.

Holly has paused singing as she builds tempo and lets the most delicious sounds pop in my ears... all sorts of sounds, punctuating faster and faster and then there's this marvelous one that resembles a soldier recharging his Zapper behind me. In a beautiful climax it all explodes and Holly comes back to rule my world.

*So won't you come around me  
I miss the way  
You reach up my head  
And play with my hair*

*Baby, won't you come  
And play with my hair  
You know how I love it  
When you touch me right there  
Baby, I love it when you play  
with my hair*

My head is swaying to the music.  
It breaks all walls and comes  
smashing into my heart. I want to  
dance and I want to keep feeling  
this way. For life. It's the most  
blissful feeling I've tasted. The  
music is so good, I feel it coming in  
my toes and in my crown. My whole  
body wants to *go, go, go!*

I cup my hands around my  
listening buds. Who cares how  
bizarrely I came to possess this



iPod. None of that matters right now. It's all about the beat for me. And I'm holding on to it real tight with eyes shut and my teeth grit with pure pleasure.

*This is so frigging good!*

Holly disappears again and the beats are back to dance with me. The last thing she said was *Play with my hair-hair-hair-hair-hair-hair-hair...* that actually went on a lot as her voice kept rising into outer space, through the stars and into oblivion where she faded away and left me with the company of the music alone.

And the music keeps stirring up like a whirlpool inside my room. Everything wants to dance but they

can't move. My bed, my closet my pillow, my clothes, the wall... they all want to float up into space and follow Holly. And I so badly want to follow her too.

Luckily, I can move. And I keep moving until I am on top of the world. Nothing matters. Nothing can stop me now. Everything I used to fear is far, far, below. So far they look so small. Nothing can own me anymore but the truth that Holly sings. And she comes back without warning to kidnap my senses again.

*So won't you come around me  
I miss the way  
You reach up my head  
And play with my hair*

*Baby, won't you come  
And play with my hair  
You know how I love it  
When you touch me right there  
Baby, I love it when you play  
with my hair*

And like that wasn't magic  
enough, her voice turns into a  
girlish robot as she says:

*I love it, I love it when you play  
with my hair...*

*I love it, I love it when you touch  
me right there...*

And the song goes on like that,  
beats smashing and recharging  
Zappers streaming but the tempo

seems to fall like the a spaceship  
slowing down in space. In time it all  
falls away like feathers, one  
instrument after the other hits  
home. The ocean waves crash in my  
ears one last time to say goodbye  
and the stars drop in my room  
again to say thank you for listening.

It's over before I know it. Over  
before I burst out crying and  
laughing and I fall back on my bed,  
breathing out and forgetting who I  
am.

No, I forgot what they told me I  
was.

Right now, I just am.

## 8

A girl leans next to a blue pickup patting the shoulder of her brother as Blake snakes through the parking lot of Rock City High.

Her smile is broad and as Blake sometimes joked, almost like the McDonald's clown they frequently saw at the mall.

"What's up, Blake?" says Matty.

Blake spreads his arms and Sherri hugs him first. Her blazing red hair falling behind her like a waterfall under her beanie.

"You always have to grab my sister first, huh?"

Sherri laughs and pulls out. Blake winks at Matty, "She's a lady."

Matty chuckles and moves in for a shoulder pump.

"So how was Hawaii?" says Blake.

"No, no, no, that's not the first question," says Sherri.

Matty rolls his head back, "Oh, not this again."

When Sherri starts stroking her hair it finally clicks in for Blake.

"Oh! How are your flames?"

Sherri laughs. She punches Matty in the arm. "Quit acting like that. I work hard for this!" she points at her hair.

"I can't see why you should.  
They're already red. You're just  
making it more... red."

"Haha, like bloody red, right?"

"I think it's cool," says Blake.

"Dude," Matty glares back,  
"You're encouraging her!"

"See. That's why I like Blake."

"Alright, now how was Hawaii?"

Sherri's hands sink in the pockets  
of her jeans. Matty's gaze falls to the  
ground.

"What's up, guys?"

Matty looks up and his eyes look  
like they need to tell a story. "Can  
we talk about this later?"

"Okay... so are we going out now?"  
Blake points with his thumb to the  
road. They always skipped the first

day of school to go out and have fun.

"Mom spoke to the principal about our skipping school thing. She's going to expect an attendance report this week," says Sherri.

The bells rings and a crowd of kids start to flow through the entrance of the main building.

"Our call," Matty strides ahead and they follow.

"Is Sammi around?" says Sherri, swinging her head around the campus like a radar.

"Yeah. Somewhere around this place."

"Great."

Mr. Avery's English class is the usual. If he has any smart questions



he always picks his daughter, Charlie, all the time. She hates it but there's not much she can do about it. He's a proud dad. Blake conquers the back of the class with Sherri, Matty and a couple of other kids who are sleeping behind text books.

This year's Xtra-literature book of choice is *The Hunger Games*, based on the previous school year's votes. Apart from the normal books they follow in the syllabus, the class gets to choose one more for fun.

When the bell for recess chimes in the class empties into the hallways. Blake drags Sherri and Matty away from their lockers, takes them down a flight of stairs in the maintenance

room and out a door that leads to a quiet spot behind the school.

Blake shuts the door behind them as they stand on a short staircase. Sherri leans against the brick wall and Matty is all hands in pockets.

"Okay guys, what's going on?" says Blake, crossing his arms, examining his two best friends. They exchange glances.

"You first," says Sherri.

"No way. Mine's worse," says Matty. "You start."

"Matty, what's up?"

"Okay, you wanna hear it?"

"I have to."

Sherri comes in, "Let's just spit it, Mat."

Matty takes a breath and turns to Blake. "Girlfriend drowned while swimming."

"And Tom dumped me," adds Sherri.

Blake's arms fall off his chest and hang loosely off their sockets. He stares back at Sherri and Matty. They stare back. It's no joke.

His face is flushed and he feels like he just lost ten pounds in a second. "Uh..."

Matty nods his head, his lips drawn back. Sherri waves her hands. "You don't need to say anything. We already get it. Worst summer ever, wasn't it?"

Blake feels the rocks on his chest and the air crushing his throat. He

was expecting bad news. Their dad was already undergoing rehab for drug addiction. Perhaps he had a relapse. But not this.

"Can we sit down?"

"Yeah," Matty gets into position.

"Sure," Sherri sandwiches Blake in the middle.

"You guys never said anything."

Matty lets out a sad laugh. He doesn't look at anything but the iron bars that support the railings of the stairs. "Like I'd say, hola mate, my girl just drowned?"

"Or I'd post about my break up on Facebook?"

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay," says Matty. "It's better to be back here."

Blake turns around to Sherri,  
"And how are you holding up?"

"He was a jerk. I'm okay. It's my brother who's screwed up."

"I'm not screwed up."

"He saw Jane die and he blames himself for letting her go off on her own."

"Sherri, stop it."

Blake is spinning his head between the two of them. Before Sherri opens her mouth he has a hand over it.

"Cool it, guys."

"I don't want to talk about Jane. Just want to forget it."

"Hawaii sucked."

"Sure did."

Blake sighs. "Guess we can leave it at that for now. Hawaii sucked."

His two friends look down and then they gaze out at the hedge surrounding the campus, almost like they're looking for something in the open to talk about. Blake can't stand this so he wraps his arms around their necks and pulls them in.

"You guys are gonna be fine. Why don't you come for the party at Charlie's place tonight?"

"Her dad will be there," says Matty.

"No, her dad is going on a date."  
Sherri's brows jump, "With who?"  
Blake chuckles, "Maths teacher."  
"Melanie?"

"You seriously need to catch up with Rock City. So you coming?"

"I am. Matty?"

"Cool. Your DJing, right?"

"Just a little gig."

"Awesome," says Sherri. "Now it's your turn to tell us what super exciting thing happened to you that we don't know yet?"

"Um..." Blake searches and he knows there isn't anything more exciting or weird than last night. He decides to give it to them straight.

"Last night I met a girl in a dream and she stole my iPod."

Matty instantly punches him in the arm, "Get real, man!"

Sherri chuckles and does the same. "Come on. Tell us what really happened."

Blake smiles, "I met a girl in my dream, guys. And she stole my iPod. Now everybody shit bricks."



I gasp deeply for a well-deserved breath as I hold onto the metallic structures around me. I look down and see the old man holding on to a steel bar, his beard and robe are pushed back with the wind as the hovercraft accelerates through the atmosphere. The engine screams.

"Get us out of here!" he roars.

I lean back against the metal. Strings of some metallic fiber are meshed with my clothes and my

mind instantly registers a name: It's Kronite.

A moment later I realize I have no memory of how I got here in this hovercraft or who I am. My own name seems to escape every time I try hard to think.

"Help me!" the old man pleads again. As I focus on his features I notice he is an Elder. And his name is Artemis. My mind is selectively blocked. I am only allowed access to certain parts of my memory that are important.

By some impulse, I know that there are only three things that make sense to me. Three instructions that I've met with time and time again. My lips move as I

say each of them quietly to myself,  
as if I am programmed:

**1. I have temporary selective  
amnesia. Focus on the subjects  
present now.**

**2. I instinctively already  
know my powers. Use them for  
the urgent cause.**

**3. Meet Rhiannon after  
completing the mission. My  
memory will then be restored.**

Now I know my job: to save the  
Elder. I steady my footing and reach  
down but it's not enough to grab his  
hand. If I don't think of something

quickly, I'll lose him. And I probably won't get my memory back.

I step down what seems to be a hole, like in a well leading out of the speeding hovercraft. The canopy of trees way below appears like a carpet.

I am close enough to pull him up. I stretch my hand again and he looks into my eyes. "We have to get off this ship!"

His words are muffled by the scream of the engine and the harsh wind. He can barely breathe.

"What?"

He opens his mouth to repeat and everything around me explodes with a sharp thunder clap. I am

thrown at the wind. Glimpses of fire flash around me as I swirl through the shower of metal.

By instinct, I pull my arms above me and I orb. The shards bounce off my force field with giddy sparks and I now have a clear view of the sky: the hovercraft is a mass of smoke, pluming through the clouds and tail-spinning away.

I twist in my orb and look down. Artemis is unconscious, sprawled in free fall, his robe spreading in the wind. The remains of the ship burn away in the atmosphere like chunks of fire littering the sky.

I fork my arms in his direction and fly down as fast as I can. The smoke from the burning scraps

swirls up at me and I steer away,  
accelerating through the air.

I know I can't lose him. For some reason I do not understand yet, this man is important. And I must keep diving. I spear through the burning material and I can see him right within good reach. His eyes are shut. His robes blowing up. A few patches appear where the fire must have contacted him. But he's okay.

I reach out and find his arm.

*Gotcha!*

As soon as I get my other arm around him I hear a cry. A couple feet below me a little boy is about to break at the sight of the pointed trees down below. When my heart

sinks for him I already know I can't let him go.

I look at Artemis. He is unconscious. He won't panic if I go for the boy and catch him later.

I dive once more, leaving the Elder falling above me and pursue to save this boy's life. His arms reach out to me and there is a light behind his eyes when he sees me.

"Don't worry," I whisper to myself. "I can save you. I will save you."

The trees zoom in closer and I realize I have little time left to pull this off. The boy sees my worry and glances down before returning his gaze to me.

*Please don't cry!*

His lips wobble and I can't bear to see this happen. I bite down hard on my own teeth, willing my orb to speed me up as I stretch and stretch and stretch...

His raised hands finally clasp with mine. *Finally!* I pull the boy into my orb where he is safe. The trees are a few heartbeats away when I look up to get Artemis.

But all I meet is a flash of purple engulfing his body. I cover my eyes for a second because it's too bright. When the purple is gone a soldier in white floats above the Elder's body, rising upwards with Jet-boots and a Zapper in his hand.

*No!*

His job is done.



In panic my orb flickers out and we fall. We are swallowed into the trees and before I can muster the strength to orb again, the boy's screams are all I hear as we come down hard, and into darkness.

On impact my world changes. My face meets a gauze of wire, much like an iron fence. It spreads beneath me into a floor. Through the wires I see a large power fan. Its wings are slowing down. I pick myself off the ground and stand.

I've never been here before. It's a huge tower that travels up until the walls look like they're coming together. The walls flaunt my reflection, the Kronite now flowing out of the fabric of my clothes and

retreating into my belt. My hair flies up from the last strokes of the power fan. My dad boasted of my beauty.

But that was a long time ago.

A metallic click sounds from the walls and a door opens. A man I know steps into the room. His long black hair is tugged back behind his ears.

Rhiannon.

"Myla," he calls. The name is familiar. It must be mine because he's looking straight at me.

"You are supposed to return my memory?"

"Yes," he nods. "Come here."

I begin to approach him but stop dead when another man with

golden hair steps in. He's shorter than Rhiannon and he's holding some device in his hand... a Nanotop.

"Who's he?"

"Cinder," he says coldly, his eyes reading something on his device.

"Fix her."

On cue Rhiannon comes to me and pulls out a syringe. "Stretch your arm."

I do as he says. He wraps a band around my arm and gives me the shot. I close my eyes. A barrier that was placed inside my mind falls apart. A rush of memories and thoughts escape... almost as if I can see them in front of me. My home underwater, the Oracle, my training

sessions with Rhiannon, Pandor,  
the Elders, Doris... everything  
stolen comes back to me.

"Rhiannon!"

He smiles at me. "Welcome back."

Cinder steps forward.

"How did I do?"

"How did you do?" He repeats my  
question, expecting me to know the  
answer to that already. And in  
truth, I can guess correctly to that.

"Awful. That's how you did!"

He fixes his eyes on mine and  
then returns to his Nanotop. I don't  
know what he's looking at but my  
best hunch is it's a video of my  
performance. "You let Artemis die  
when you could have easily saved  
him. For a little boy!"

"Who says he didn't deserve saving?"

"Versus an Elder? He is just another scrap of metal from the hovercraft," Cinder blares.

My mouth gaps with shock. I almost cringe my face because I'm so disgusted with his words.

"That's stupid. Who knows? That boy could be the next Lebra!" I attack.

"Or... when the enemy knows how sentimental you are, they will pull in holographic kids to steer away your attention from the real problem."

Rhiannon joins the argument, more to cool things down for me.

"Myla, if you're ever confronted

with a similar scenario, your job is to save whoever is more important or higher in command and then, if possible, you can rescue anyone else. For instance, if the Tower is burning and you're in a room where everybody is unconscious. Do you save Thea or Cinder?"

A smile spreads across my face.

"Thea definitely."

"Good," Rhiannon grins.

"This is not a joke," Cinder snarls.

"I just want Myla to understand the concept in the most relevant way."

"Yeah?" Cinder turns back to me.

"Trying to play smart? The only concepts you need to know are the Laws of Capricorn. Is that clear?"

Though I hate it, I must. "Yes sir."

"State the laws!" he shouts.

I cringe at his breath and shut my eyes so I don't have to see him so close to my face. I state the Laws of Capricorn in their order, not missing a word.

"The First Law of Capricorn: Peace is an illusion and the leaders have power over that illusion.

"The Second Law of Capricorn: Protect the most important life, everyone else is expendable.

"The Third Law of Capricorn: If caught, a Lebra must commit suicide to preserve the secrets of Pandor."



Cinder pulls back, satisfied.  
"Good. You now see you broke the second law?"

I turn to Rhiannon. He nods slightly and I understand it's best to play nice with Cinder.

"Yes. It won't happen again."

"One day all of this will be real. I hope that day doesn't come for you." With that Cinder turns and heels out the door.

Rhiannon pats my back, "Let's go. You did well."

We move to the door and walk through a gleaming white tunnel, arching over our heads. "I flunked. I couldn't save the Elder."

"You could. You just wanted to save more than you could. You

thought tactically. You knew you could get the boy as well. But you weren't careful. And that spoiled your report."

We exit from a door at the end of the tunnel and meet with burning daylight. I block the light with my arm and the miniature city falls into vision.

A gigantic dome encloses this massive facility. It's a small version of my home city, Doris, full with towers, roads and parks and even people. Not real people, cloned people.

This is where I have my Amnesia Trials. To a stranger it would look like any ordinary town. But it's not. Every time I land here, Rhiannon

injects a fluid that temporarily creates an amnesia that is selective. I can only remember a few details that I am required to. Like the three instructions for the tests. Rhiannon's facial recognition... just in case there are complications and he has to intervene.

My Amnesia Trials feel like lucid dreams and I am able to conjure twice as much power than I normally do. On one occasion I was madly blasting orbs in a hospital with clone patients scurrying under falling debris and Rhiannon had to step in. I don't hurt him and I can't. I'm hardwired that way.

I look up at the dome again. It's translucent from the inside. From

the outside you can't see a thing. No one else gets inside here except special agents. Not even Phoebe or Thea. It's the most respected training ground I have. And the most important. Because with most of my memory gone for five minutes to one hour, it shows them who I really am and what I would really do.

And that's the scary part.

Rhiannon and I walk through the streets, ignoring the clones as if they're zombies and enter a Track Station. They're like stations for roller-coaster rides, only these are used for transportation. There are tons of these running through the deep jungle and mountains.

This particular Track Station is classified for use only by me, Rhiannon, Cinder and the special agents who work at the Dome (someone has to take care of the clones and fix my mess when I fight Golgorians under simulation).

We walk on a platform raised above the tracks where a car rests, waiting for us. It looks like a glass egg with two leather seats. A door slides open via telepathic automation just like the Vine, and we take our seats. We don't have to think of where to go because the only place these cars travel is between the Major Tower and the Dome. It automatically jolts into

motion and accelerates forward on the tracks.

The tunnel has almost no lights at all, except for the glowing orb spheres hovering in the car.

The only thing I can think about is the music in that little device. I did my best not to think about it when I left home. They watch me too closely. I want to keep acting like the Myla they know. One toe out of line and Cinder will get suspicious. Then I'll have Artemis to babysit me every day at his home in the pink pyramids. And I don't want that. They'd probably probe me all over to see what's wrong. There's barely any room to be me.

Except in my room.

That's the only place reserved for my privacy. No cameras. No mics. Nada. They have enough surveillance around my house, in and out to detect a fly in my shower so this is their way of showing me a little mercy. There I can listen to all the music I want. I can visualize my iPod resting under my pillow, waiting for me to catch up on the many magical songs it has for me. Like a best friend you want to see when you get home.

"What's that smile for?"

I snap out of it and come back to the tunnel. Rhiannon looks like he's been watching me for a good while.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

My lips curve and my reflection  
returns my smile in the glass.

"Yeah... nothing."

"Come on, you never keep stuff  
from me."

"You sure?"

"What do you mean?"

"If I kept stuff from you, you  
wouldn't know because logically you  
wouldn't know."

"Logically you'd think that  
because you can't see your face. It's  
screaming all these signals at me  
like hey, I have a secret."

Rhiannon makes me laugh. I don't  
remember anyone else who does  
that to me. He's the only one who  
cares about me. But perhaps there's  
someone else. A boy. I'm not sure if



he's real. Or if he's not. But then he can't not be real because I have his iPod. And Pandora doesn't make iPods. Besides that there's not much music anyway.

*Artists.*

I barely know any artist in Pandora. I stole a few minutes in the morning to listen to *Play With My Hair* on repeat and another song, *Stay* by *The Dorks*. (Since I was spending too much time in my room they sent Rhiannon in and I had to rush into the Scanning room and pretend that I'd slept in a few minutes).

I know two artists now. But none from Pandora. I start to wonder if we do have any artists here.

"Myla?"

I shake out of it again.

"I'm sorry," I snap, but Rhiannon is no longer beside me. The car's door is open and he's standing outside on the platform.

"We're here."

"Oh," I fight against my cheeks that want to blush and take a stride out of the car and into the Major Tower's underground Track Station.

"You feeling okay?" He asks as we walk in the dim. Clone soldiers are lined across the Station with Zappers poised.

"Yeah... just tired."

*Shit! I'm already losing focus.*

"You won't tell on me, right?"

Rhiannon clears, "Well, I am concerned about your attention. It has a direct relationship to your performance and wellbeing. And actually, if I do, it won't be telling on you. It will be reporting."

"I know... sorry."

"You're the most important person in Pandor, Myla. I admire you for what you've done so far. But you need to understand the circumstances are different," he stops in his tracks and grabs my shoulders as he speaks into my face, his eyes squared on mine. "The hope of an entire planet is on you. There are two scenarios. You can live up to that hope and leave a

legacy. Or you can break a billion hearts. Including my own."

He lets his hands fall back but doesn't move. My eyes are still locked on his as I digest and turn over his every word. He breaks contact and continues round a corner toward the Vine where the elevators glow blue in the dark.

I know I am important. My life and all I do is very crucial. But isn't there more to life than following what I'm told to do? Isn't there a place where I can stop focusing on being special and start to *feel* special?

The door slides down and we step into the elevator. When we are sealed we start to snake up the Vine

in circles. The landscape images on the screen are irrelevant to me now.

I lust for a person who makes me feel special. And if that person is as real as I think he is, I'll break all of Capricorn's stupid laws to protect him.

Sometimes he feels like a pivot for Sherri and Matty. It's probably why they're best friends. And why he cares for them so damn much. He can't possibly fathom how badly their summer in Hawaii turned into a disaster vacation. But now he's here to help fix them up with great music.

He's standing being his DJ equipment up in Charlie's home. The disco ball glitters over the kids from school, swaying to the music.

*Girls can Dance* slowly fades out and Blake waits for the best moment to transition to the next song. And he's flawless at it, introducing *One Two Three* by *The Alphabets* in a way that makes the beats sound the same. No one notices a new song is already playing until the new beats surface and when they do, they burst into a whole new frenzy of dance and cheers.

Blake smiles at his magic. His favorite skills at work. He turns to his Macbook and rearranges the songs, studying the party to guess what they're in a mood for next.

*Electro-pop... Dance...?*

He looks up at the crowd and decides to let *The Alphabet's* song play a little longer, fading back to the middle of the song and hitting play, careful enough so the party thinks their favorite song has grown a few minutes longer tonight than what they normally experience on the radio.

Sherri escapes the crowd, holding a cup of POP and sauntering all the way to Blake's little DJ booth.

"It's great!" she yells over the music.

"Thanks!"

She holds out the POP for him.

"Thought you could use a drink."

"At least someone remembers the DJ."



She laughs, "You know I can't forget."

Blake takes a sip of the soda. He then beams at the now-playing song on his Mac. About now he's figured out what the fans will like next. He clicks on *Round and Round* by *Butterflies* and drags it in place right under the *Alphabet's* track.

"Hey, can I have a song?" says Sherri. Blake turns to her and she smiles under her beanie. "I got you POP!" she quickly adds.

Blake chuckles, looking back at the cup in his hand, "So that's what this is about."

Sherri laughs, "Nooo... okay, it may be... like fifty percent of it for

the song, fifty percent of it because I like you."

Blake nods his head with humor, "Okay, what do you want? If the crowd will love it, you get it."

"Yay! *Parachutes* by *Bullfighters*."

Blake grins, "You know, that song actually suits the atmosphere here. *Parachutes* right on!"

He turns to his Mac and slides *Parachutes* right under *Round and Round* and then *Yahoo*, another *Bullfighters* song. He adds a few more tracks in the list and leans back to read the crowd.

The party has its last round of screaming *One Two Three!* before the light hypnotizing beats of *Round and Round* sweep in. It's the

type of song that makes you want to sit and nod your head. But not too hard. Just a gentle nod and a smile and that's good for three minutes of your life.

As he reads the crowd Blake notices Sherri singing along to the chorus beside him. It has lyrics that you can't help but sing along to. It's a song that owns you and keeps you close and makes you its friend.

*Round and Round*

*Round and round*

*The temples will be burning*

*She will scream out loud*

*But love will always find you*

*Because the world is round*

*Round and round*

*Round and round*

"I love this song!" Sherri yells.

"Who doesn't?"

"Charlie."

"Why?"

"She's weird... hey! Wanna dance?"

"Uh..." Blake looks down at the playlist.

"Come on. Don't be a bore."

"Hold on. Just want to run a check —hey!"

Sherri drags him out of the booth and through the party under the flashing disco-ball lights. When she let's go her hands are already in the air and her body is swaying.

"Woooah!"

Blake turns and jumps and... he doesn't really know how to dance so Sherri snaps and talks him out of the madness. "Dude, let's keep it simple. Hands on my hips and flow with me, okay?"

He follows what she says and it seems to work out better.

"Eyes on mine if you lose the flow," she adds. "Don't embarrass me."

"Sherri, chill. I got this."

"Oh really? Can I let you go?"

Blake grins and comes quick, "No. Keep making me look good. I'm paying for it."

Sherri laughs, taking a glance at the Mac. Her favorite song comes

out of the speakers and she screams.

*The Bullfighters* are an energetic band with an album full of party and dance songs. *Parachutes* is the epitome of all of that and Sherri is literally in the air for a full four minutes with Blake trying to catch up with her pace. *Parachutes* turns the floor into a trampoline and makes everyone reach for the stars. When the song ends Sherri wipes the sweat off her face and takes a break.

"Man, that was awesome!"

"You had a Redbull?"

"Haha, no. It's my favorite song. I can't help it—oh my gosh!" Sherri

shrieks and Blake spins around for anything out of the ordinary.

"Three o'clock."

Blake turns right and finds Matty smooching with Charlie at the wall. Blake shrugs. "So? He needs to work things out some way."

"I know but Charlie? Of all girls?"

"What's wrong with Charlie?"

"For starters. She has a boy's name. She could be transsexual!"

Blake takes a second look at her, smirking." Come on, Sherri. Let's go play your next favorite song."

"Forget it. I'm going home," she steps away from Blake but he's quick to grab her hand.

"Hey. What's wrong here?"

"It's not important."

"It is, Sherri. Come on... for the DJ."

She sighs. "Later. In the car."

"And where are you heading now?"

"I don't know? A closet perhaps."

"Why don't you help me add songs to the playlist? You taught me to dance. I can teach you a thing or two about being a DJ."

She makes a small smile. *It's not a bad idea.* "Okay."

"Great."

They head back to the makeshift DJ booth and the *Yahoo* is playing. Blake begins to tell her how to read the crowd and see what kind of songs get people off their butts and onto the dance floor.



"Almost like finding the one song that's everybody's favorite."

"Cool."

He shows her his equipment and the endless list of songs on the Mac. This is where he chooses the ones that make it to the party's playlist.

"What songs you think we should add?"

"I think electro and dance get the most people dancing."

"How about... *Save me Alaska?*"

Sherri peers at the track list. "Who sung that?"

"*Peter Pans.*"

"Why don't we play..." She goes for the touch pad and drags *Teleporting* by *Fall Out Cities.*"

Blake smiles. It's another one of her favorites. And it still fits the mood just right.

He shows her how to make the songs transition from one to the next. "It's like gluing songs," he explains. "Until the beats are sticky and in phase. The crowd shouldn't notice when a new song starts. They should find themselves already dancing to it."

Sherri watches as he slides *Teleporting* under the now playing track and matches the beats of the songs. It's like a magic trick to her. She tries transitioning with *Say Yeah*, another *Bullfighters* song but messes it up. The heavy beats and *World War Z* zombie-like craze of

the *Bullfighters* is too much to glue with *Fall Out Cities* exciting and pitched tones.

The night at the DJ booth is worth it. When the party's over, Sherri, Matty and Blake climb into the blue pickup and drive home. Sherri is on the wheel, Blake in the passenger and Matty snoring in the back. They don't turn on the radio. They've had enough bullfighting music for one night.

It's a quiet ride until Blake breaks the ice. "So you ready to tell me?"

Sherri sighs, looking straight ahead as they drive into a tunnel. "Remember when I said Tom dumped me?"

"It was because of Charlie?"

Sherri slowly nods her head. Half thankful she didn't have to say it for herself.

"Matty—"

"He doesn't know. I just told him Tom and I broke up."

"Matty doesn't ask questions," adds Blake.

"Yeah... he doesn't... the night he dumped me, I saw him cheating with her. All the times he hung up on me... I finally know who he was with... just so many stupid lies."

"I'm sorry, Sherri."

A tear escapes her eye and runs down her cheeks. Blake reaches up but Sherri rubs it away first. "I got it. Thanks, Blake."

"But why's Charlie hooking with your brother now?"

"She dumped Tom a few days ago."

"Shouldn't we warn Matty?"

"He's just trying to get over Jane. It's either Charlie or drugs. Enough about me. Tell me how you met this dream girl again?"

"In a dream," Blake replies.  
"That's it."

"And you think she's real?"

Blake laughs. But it's out of disbelief. Not humor. "I can't find my iPod Sherri."

And now Sherri laughs. But it's out of humor. And Blake laughs again too.

"Know what? I have a plan."

"What?"

"If you dream of her again tonight, ask her for your iPod back and then break up with her."

"But we're not a couple or anything. How—"

"Blake, you have her panties in your room. That says a lot... if it's all true."

"Alright. And if I do get my iPod back?"

"Well, that means she's real," she turns her face to his, "And if I were you I'd be zoinked to have a relationship like that!"

"Spooky, huh?"

"Just... just double check your room. That iPod has got to be somewhere."

"I know it's mad."

"It's crazy, Blake." says Sherri.

"Damn crazy... like Matty and Charlie crazy."

Blake stares out at the road. Myla's face floats in his mind, as vivid as before. He hasn't given it much thought. Myla is a book he is not ready to read. But perhaps tonight, whether he's ready or not he just might have to open that book again.

And Sherri's words start to make some sense.

*I need that iPod back.*

Do you have any idea how hard it is to keep yourself from thinking about someone that matters so much to you?

I've struggled all day to keep this boy's face out of my mind. It wasn't easy. Especially with *Play With My Hair* stuck on replay in my head. The music goes on and on even after listening to it. And I have to fight to suppress it.

I'm finally back home where it's safe to think about anything I want.



Where there are no sensors to read my brain waves and Cinder won't have know that I'm listening to music.

I still do have to listen to the Hypnotic tones a little bit in the morning. But only a little, just to mask over the brain waves that the music leaves behind. Trust me, you don't want to walk into the Major Tower with music in your head or an unknown brain wave pattern.

The sensors will catch you. And with all those clone soldiers in there there's no telling what could possibly happen.

So I think my deepest thoughts in secret. I know it may sound insane.

Aren't my own thoughts hidden  
safely in my own head?

Well... no.

Welcome to Pandor.

Where freedom of thought is not a  
real right and my own thinking  
about myself poses a threat that  
could call in the enemy to my exact  
location as if I was screaming my  
whereabouts from a bull horn.

Weird what one quiet and  
innocent voice in my head can do.  
But not here. My home is my  
sanctuary. And as long as Pandor is  
shielded there's nothing stopping  
me from fantasizing this boy's face.

I lie on my bed, one hand in my  
hair as I remember his own. My lips

move with the words of my favorite  
song:

*I love it, I love it when you play  
with my hair...*

*I love it, I love it when you touch  
me right there...*

I close my eyes and remember a  
kiss that almost happened. Why did  
I have to get so scared and wake up?  
I really screwed this up for myself. I  
won't make that mistake again.

I have a feeling I'll see this guy  
again. I can't wait to meet him and  
rape his lips and... love him?

*Myla, are you falling?*

I find myself laughing at the  
ceiling and how weird and crazy

and sweet all of this is. A boy in my dreams. Who lives in Alaska. Wherever the heck that is in this Universe.

I know he's real. I just know he's real. My missing panties and his iPod—something never made before in Pandor, all the music artists listed inside and their pictures. Their faces that clearly do not reflect the make-belief peaceful aura that Pandor inflicts on its people through Hypnotic tones—courtesy of Capricorn's First Cruddy Law.

When they told me I could possibly have more strengths than they would expect, I had no idea it could possibly mean that I could

meet with someone in a different planet, share a dream and exchange items during our sleep. I used to have childhood dreams where I would play at the beach or run in the fields with Xena and she would give me a little red shovel that I loved a lot. And while I was waking up I would try to hold on to that shovel but always awoke gripping thin air.

This is different. This is magical. This is something I can never tell Cinder, Thea, Phoebe or even Rhiannon. I can't let them destroy this too. I can't let them destroy what I could have with this boy.

They can never know about my new world.

Or my new... love?

*Jeez, why do I get nervous just by thinking about that!?*

There's no one here to probe into my head and besides, no one can actually read my thoughts.

But then... what if he doesn't really like me the way I like him?

My chest sinks in and I feel dehydrated just by the doubt. What if he has someone else over there in Alaska? What if he doesn't like the way I live or if he's afraid of the kind of life I live? What if all he wants to do is have sex... in a world like that... would it even be real? Could I even wake up pregnant?

I bump my head with my palm, feeling silly. I feel so stupid for even

suggesting that. But I really like this boy. Maybe this is what it's like to like someone. I wouldn't know. It's my first time. And it's better than having to crush on my own trainer—yes, that almost happened one blue moon ago.

I reach for the iPod again. It's fully charged. Like most homes, this one is built with a wireless charging service that juices up anything with a battery.

I plug in my buds and explore the playlist on the screen. There are so many titles that I want to tap on and listen to. I am tired and I will probably fall asleep in a couple of minutes. And then I might meet

Blake again. I hope. So I can... ask him out?

*Out where? The only place you hang out is in that dreamy world that is in fact abnormally too real to be a dream...*

"Shut up, Myla!" I snap at myself. *Eyes on the screen now.* I find a song that I think will put me to sleep, thinking about my encounter in a more positive way.

*More than just a Dream.*

I tap and it plays. I let my head sink back into my pillow and picture myself kissing this boy so hard. Yeah... that's how I like to see it. The fantasy is positive and it makes me feel like maybe for the



first time in my life, real love can  
happen.

The flowing stream is muffled under the beats. It's funny how the song I was listening to before I fell asleep is the same one playing right now as I sit crossed legged, gazing at the steady water. The iPod is in my hands as my fingers dance.

The power of music is not enough to calm my too excited heart. I wish there was a way to tell it to slow down but there isn't. I can't lie to my heart. It knows where I am. It's

a world so perfect you feel exactly  
like what you look at.

When I lie down to watch the  
clouds, I become the clouds. When I  
stare at the mountains I feel strong  
and confident and very content.  
Watching the flowing stream is  
supposed to make me feel patient  
and calm, free with every worry  
washed away. But my heart knows  
I'm waiting on a boy. So that just  
complicates the equation. I do hope  
this anxiety and this sweating is a  
good thing, if it's anything at all.

*This could be more than just a  
dream*

*This could be more than you and  
me*

*Never thought that I'd believe  
A love so good it's crazy*

I sway to the whistles in the song,  
the *oh-oh-oh*, the clapping beats,  
the drums that hammer like they  
want to tell me a story. Perhaps one  
of a very cool boy who fell in love  
with a girl who was not so cool.

*Star-crossed lovers  
Do you hear the song on the  
radio?*

*There's a map on the cover  
How would we know  
How we'd find each other?*

I barely understand what the  
words mean but they make some

sense in the rhythm. It's a language of feelings, not just words. No matter what words you put, it will only mean the same.

I'm about to follow the song through to the next verse when I hear the grass shuffling behind me. In a heartbeat I know it's him.

I bounce on my feet and spin.

Blake.

He looks at me like I startled him. Or is he amazed? I press pause as he takes a couple steps closer and raises his hand. "Hi!"

"Hi!" I smile.

*Okay, Myla. This is it! This is it!!!  
Don't screw it or you'll be sorry.*

"Um... thanks for the iPod," I hold it up.

"Yeah..." He squints his eyes at his device. "...about that..."

"I'm no longer a caged bird. Well, not so much as I normally was," I'm quick to add, hoping to make an impression.

Blake makes a little smile. But it's not like he's really happy. It's like he's sorry he made me happy.

"I love your songs. *Play with my hair* is my favorite so far. I didn't get to listen to many songs because I have lots to do. Being a Lebra is crazy."

Blake doesn't say anything. Maybe he's thinking of what to say. I notice his eyes are fixed on his iPod.

"You want it back?" I ask. "I'm sorry if—"

"It's okay," he says. It's soothing to hear him say something again. He studies me, pulling in his lower lip and I'm getting these tingles... *are you attracted to me?*

"So this is real," he says, like something he is now coming to terms with.

"Yeah. If you have my panties then it's more than just a dream," I quote from my most recent song, "It's real."

He takes a deep breath and looks around. The mountains behind me, the tall trees tearing into the skyline and the aura of being one with anything you focus on. This definitely doesn't happen in a dream.

"What kind of place is this?"

"I don't know," I say. "But I do know it's one of my strengths."

"You mean powers?"

I smile. It's something I can't help.  
"Yes."

"What other powers do you... forget it," he finishes off. The sudden lack of interest in me hits me in the guts. I want him to like me.

Wait, I want him to *love* me.

I need to play nice.

"Yeah, boring topic. Would you like to listen to some music together. Maybe you could show me your favorite songs."

I think I nailed it with that.  
Swerve the attention to something



we can do together. Then tell him how much I like him. Maybe it will take a couple of dreams like this to build a relationship. But I'm willing to do all it takes. No matter how many nights.

Blake stretches his hand toward his device. "Please?" He says.

I carefully carry his iPod and place it in his hands as gently as I can. It's the most precious thing in the universe.

"Thank you," he leans back and tucks his iPod in his pocket. "I hope you don't mind but I don't have your—"

"Keep it. It's okay."

"Oh, okay. Then..." He clasps his hands together and shoots me a hard gaze. "I guess it ends here."

If I had his precious iPod in his hands I would have dropped it.

"It ends here?" I raise my brows like I can't see wide enough at my new crushing reality.

"Yes. This weird me-meeting-you-in-a-dreamy-place thing. It ends here. Don't lure me in here."

"I don't. I swear I don't."

"I thought you said it was your strength."

I open my mouth but I don't have words. I open my chest but I can't breathe. Blake turns around and he is walking away.

When the tears trickle I find my voice and it breaks out like a caged bird who wants to sing.

"Wait!"

He doesn't turn back.

"I liked it when you played with my hair."

He stops.

"And when you touched me."

He turns again and maybe, maybe now there could be some hope to make this work.

"I think I like you!" I blurt out. My arms are tight against my sides with balled fists, so desperate to grab that boy. *Please don't walk away. Pleaaaaase!*

"I'm sorry, Myla. I can't do this."

With that he heels out until he becomes a blur. The film on my eyes balls out into a tear. My guts feel so bad. Every vein in my face hurts and my arms lose their strength. I can't carry a feather. I turn back to the stream and fall to the ground. Crying and sobbing and pulling myself into a fetal position on my bed. It's dark and the Lunabees are glowing out my window like lamps in the water.

My hair falls over my shoulders and I stroke some strands off my cheek. My other hand notices that the iPod is gone.

It's really gone.

And he's gone too.

Blake strolls in the cafeteria holding his tray of lunch: a pizza, some pudding, a packet of chocolate milk and an apple. Sherri, Matty and Charlie have conquered a table by the window. Sherri waves him over. More out of an eager need for help and at the sight of Charlie caressing her brother's sideburns he doesn't need to ask why.

"Hey guys!" says Blake.

"sup!" says Matty.

"Um... when did Charlie join us?"  
he asks, more to Sherri than to  
Matty.

"Today. You have a problem with  
that?" she says.

"No. I just had something  
personal to say to my buds. You  
don't mind do you?"

Matty looks over at Charlie who's  
giving him a reluctant stare. "Give  
us a minute."

"Whatever," she gets off the bench  
and heads out the cafeteria.

"Thanks, Blake," says Sherri.

"Guys, what's going on?"

"I think I like Charlie," says Matty.  
"Sherri doesn't."

"Of course she doesn't. You know  
why?" says Blake.

"Yeah... she told me. She should've told me earlier."

"I never thought you and Charlie would hook up," Sherri snaps. "She was supposed to be with Tom!"

"Okay, okay. We're friends, right? If Charlie is gonna be around then Sherri maybe you should just let it go."

"Oh, really?" She crosses her arms and shoots Blake daggers through her eyes.

"Come on. I know it sucks. But what sucks more is you having to relive Tom's betrayal every time you see Charlie around."

"She cheated with—"

"Shhh!" Matty tries to calm her down. Sherri has a tendency of

bursting into wild tantrums. She won't care where she is or who the hell is watching. In other words, she can really make a scene.

"She cheated with my ex!"

"Then screw Tom and screw her too."

"Blake! She is dating my brother. Do you know how insulting that is?"

He sighs. He turns to Matty. "Bro. Will you call it quits with Charlie just so your sister will live in peace?"

"I'm currently finding it hard to let go of her lap dances."

Sherri turns to Matty. "Seriously?"

"Hey. If Tom cheated with my ex and you liked him. Would you break



up just because it felt uncomfortable?"

Sherri takes a deep breath. Her chest heaves up and down as she breathes out her mouth. She turns away and attacks her cold pizza.

"Listen. Maybe there's a way you and Charlie can be friends. But for now I think Matty shouldn't bring her over to our booth."

Sherri looks up, slightly more positive. "That makes some sense."

"Seriously?" Matty raises his hands at Blake. "How am I going to explain that to her?"

"She stole my ex. I think she'll understand," Sherri says with a grin.

"Cool. That's settled," Blake grabs his milk and pulls out the straw.

"Fine," says Matty, back to his fruit. "I'll talk to Charlie. Anyway, did you get your iPod back?"

Blake looks up to meet his grin. He turns to Sherri and she sinks in her shoulders, biting her tongue.

"Oops!"

"You told him?"

"I wasn't supposed to?"

"Sherri!"

"Come on. You told him half of it already."

"I didn't tell him I was going to try get it back."

"Hey," Matty intervenes. "Enough chit chat. Did you meet this Greek goddess again and get your iPod.

What was her name again...

Pandora?"

"Seriously?" says Sherri. "The one who let evil loose in the world?"

Matty chuckles and Sherri is busy trying to look all sorry. Blake reaches for his pocket and the next thing they see is his iPod sliding on the table.

"She gave it back to me."

Matty and Sherri drop their jaws and gawk long enough for a baby to count to five.

Matty starts, "You're sure it wasn't —"

"She gave it back to me. Simple."

Matty crosses his arms, "Hm... Impressive."

"Impressive?" says Blake, quite offended.

"Easy, dude. 'was just being ironic."

"So this is real?" says Sherri.

"Guess so. Hard to believe, isn't it?"

Sherri takes the iPod in her hands.  
"It's fully charged. You said it was —"

"Thirty percent before I slept."

"And why is this happening?" says Matty.

Blake shrugs. "I don't know. I called it off. Told her I didn't want anything to do with her."

"Sherri told you to do that?"

"I thought it was the right thing for Blake to do."

"Ever since Tom it's like you want all the other boys to break up with their girls."

Sherri opens her mouth to argue but pauses like she didn't fully understand what her brother just said. When she does she becomes frozen in a glare. Matty can smell his mistake and he gets off the bench before the tantrum begins. "I think I should go look for Charlie."

Sherri's gaze follows him. "You can't even apologize when you know you should!" she shouts back.

"I'm sorry, Sherri," Blake reaches out. Sherri whacks his hands away and shoves her pizza into his face. It goes splat and slides down his shirt.

"Don't talk to me," she gets up quick and storms away. Blake hurries after her. Out the cafeteria and into the hallway.

"Sherri!" he calls out. "Sherri, wait!"

Her sobs are like a trail, leading Blake straight to her as she heads to the Ladies. She paces faster and Blake has to run just to catch up. He pulls her arm and turns her around. "Sherri!"

"Let me go! You don't know what it feels like to be dumped."

"I'm sorry about this, okay?" He pulls her in for a hug and she doesn't push. No matter how much she wants to be alone, she knows she needs it. Blake strokes her back.

"It's going to be okay. He shouldn't have said that. I'm sure he didn't mean to."

"He's stupid."

"Sometimes."

Sherri pulls out and rests her hand on the door jamb of the toilet.

"Sorry I got pizza all over your face... and your shirt. I lost it back there."

"And I'm sorry you got some of it on you too."

Sherri looks down at herself and notices the smear on her own T-shirt. "It was worth it."

She opens the door and leaves Blake outside the Ladies.

*What a lunch this turned into.*

He turns around and the bell rings, signaling the end of recess. Everyone begins to flow out to class. In the midst of activity in the hallway, he sees a girl. Her long auburn hair dances in the air. Her cute face is cringed with a frown. She is not happy. There is no light in her eyes.

She speaks, "You don't know what it feels like to be dumped."

Blake's pulse starts to race and he jolts when there's a touch on his shoulder. In an instant his eyes are up. Mr. Avery takes his hand off. "Didn't mean to startle you. We have class now. Poetry. The caged bird's wings are clipped and his feet are tied... come on now, finish up..."



Blake nearly stammers on the words. As if they choke. Mr. Avery beams at him and Blake spits out the next line of the poem. "So he opens his throat to sing."

"Great. Off you go. You're supposed to be seated in class before I get there."

Blake hurries away with the other kids, frantically looking from side to side. He can only see graffiti filled lockers. She is nowhere.

But her voice is still locked inside his head and maybe, he thinks, if she was just another girl at school who really liked him and his songs, then last night would be different.

From here all I can see through the windows are the bars of light, illuminating the Battle Room inside. I'm standing in a dim corridor with Rhiannon. Most of the Major Tower is so dim you'd think the Elders are trying to hide something.

"Gear up," he says.

I take a breath and by mutual telepathy the Kronite knows I need protection. It begins to seep out of my belt and fill the spaces in

between my fabric, sewing itself into my clothes. My blue jeans and grey sweatshirt turn sparkly grey.

The door ahead of me slides open.

"Are your buds on?" he asks.

I reach for my ears and click them on. I have them so he can communicate to me while I'm inside.

"Good. I'll be in the Control Room with Cinder. All the best," he turns away and I stroll into the light.

The floor of the Battle Room is covered in ponds of white light as I walk to the center of the dome. It's been neatly polished since the last time I was here. The tube-lights on the wall aim their radiance on me like spotlights. Rhiannon is now in

the Control Room, separated from me by a window. He raises his thumb and I raise mine.

I don't look ahead at the wall. There are no drones in this battle room for me to smash with my orbs. Instead, I look up, anticipating something way more challenging than that.

Rhiannon sounds in my ear,  
"Ready?"

The Kronite spreads to my collar and I can feel the cold grey living metal caressing my neckline. Perhaps a little too intimately. It can sense my adrenaline rush so I understand its overprotectiveness.

"Ready!"

A sharp buzz signals the start of my battle session. I throw my arms into the air and draw out an orb over my entire body. Through the aura of my force-field the tube-lights are now visible as blurry patches, sizzling along the walls.

I hone my senses. My view becomes clear. The first step in any battle is to mark my defense.

The ceiling of the dome begins to light up with circles of red light, almost the way stars ignite the sky. Without warning, one of the circles spears forth into a laser beam and I spin out of the way as it hits the floor. It reflects, ricocheting off the walls, bouncing around.

I keep my eyes to the ceiling where another laser escapes and I dodge again. The two laser beams start to chase each other, bouncing off the round walls. Focusing on my hand, I suck my orb into a powerful ball and gaze up.

A third and fourth laser zap out. I thrust and my orb neutralizes one of the laser beams. In my experience I know it can absorb up to ten before it starts to disintegrate.

Cinder decreases the timing from the control room and more lasers beam out for me. I dash away and orb again, ducking the red lasers that bounce from the walls. In two swift hooks, I send two more orbs

into the air. The lasers are absorbed and I orb again, in time to save myself from a laser attack.

At this point the Battle Room is glowing red with lasers running loose. My orbs bob in the air like soap bubbles. A few of them begin to disappear from taking in too many laser beams.

I duck a shot and keep running for safer ground as red strobes of light hit the floor behind me. There are enough to keep this party going on for hours.

*I've gotta keep up.*

Rhiannon watches closely with his arms crossed over his chest as I dash across the room, thrusting orbs at incoming lasers. A beam

shoots from the pinnacle of the dome and stabs my orb on my zenith. The red light fights to push through my shield.

From the corner of my eye I can see Cinder adjusting the power of the laser beam. It presses harder and I can feel the burning sensation, the heat tingling the back of my neck.

The strands of Kronite licking my collarbone begin to flow over my neck and form a shield around my face.

Cinder pushes a lever and the force on my orb brings me down on my knees. The laser beam is not giving me a chance to slide away. It



feels heavy, persistent and merciless.

I keep my arms outstretched over my head, biting down. The lasers bouncing off the walls find their way to me and I have to add the effort of absorbing them into my orb and using their power against this one laser beam that won't give up. It's not easy because it requires me to focus on two separate functions.

The muscles in my thighs begin to shake and my core is running out of stamina.

"What are you trying to do?" says Rhiannon.

"Test her," says Cinder.

"Looks like more than just a test."

"Do you have a problem with pushing her potential a little further? Wouldn't that be a win for all of us? And for Pandor?"

"Not like this. Those lasers are—"

"Are not lethal."

"Potentially lethal," Rhiannon beams down at him. "And with the power in that beam..."

"It won't kill her."

"Then what!" Rhiannon spits.

Cinder sighs, "It does have a painful tasing effect on the subject."

"You want to electrocute her?"

Cinder ups his tone. "If she fails," then shoots him a glare. "It will tase, not electrocute. There's a difference."

"This isn't the kind of training she needs."

"Don't be a fool, Rhiannon. She needs a push. The Elders know it. So do you. Stretaka is right outside our front door, waiting on us. Waiting for any opportunity. For any mistake. Anything to find its way in and kill us all."

Cinder points to the window, his finger on me. "And if she's not ready to face him. You know what will happen to her."

"I understand. But this..." He points to me as I struggle to hold my orb under the laser. "There has to be some better way."

"Really?" Cinder turns to the lever and gives it a nudge. "Tell me? You

like to play pretend, don't you?  
That's why Myla likes you so much.  
You fantasize with her. You make  
her feel like it's all clear blue skies  
and sunny weather. You're fooling  
her. Just like how the Elders are  
fooling everyone in Pandor."

Rhiannon cannot muster a reply.  
He takes a deep angry breath. The  
kid has got to him and he hates it.

"I don't care what you think. This  
is how a real Lebra is trained," he  
pushes the lever another level  
higher.

The laser is double its power and  
eating its way into my orb. Closer  
and closer to my face. I can feel the  
heat. My palms are sweaty from  
supporting my orb. The Kronite has

now found its way to my forehead,  
working down my eyebrows.

The red light is all I see. It  
splashes over like a red sun. With  
blurred vision I see the door of the  
Battle Room sliding down.  
Someone is running to me.

I see Blake.

My heart melts. The sorrow  
returns. Everything I've tried so  
hard to forget is racing back to my  
mind. I crammed the Hypnotic  
tones to my ears right after I woke  
up this morning, hoping that they  
would erase such an unforgettable  
dream. He lingers under the strobes  
of lasers bouncing off the walls and  
ceiling. Blake is clearly trying to get  
to me but I have no idea why. Why

is he even here? To apologize? To help?

The sad hungry hole inside consumes me. I can't take this kind of emotion. Especially when I've been trained to be emotionally unavailable. No, this can't torment me. I can't accept to feel this way. It hurts so much and it wants to come out. I don't want to cry. I can't... it wants to come out... it wants to—I can't handle this rage.

*"Aargh!"*

With superhuman strength I get on two so fast it feels like I'm flying. My orb leaves my body and travels up the length of the laser, speeding and absorbing it without fail until it

crashes into the pinnacle of the dome.

The red circles explode. A display of fireworks come forth from the ceiling and I stand in awe at the work of my own sheer strength as the sparks streak through the air.

I turn my gaze ahead to see the boy again but he's not there. Or it wasn't him. Rhiannon dodges the sparks raining from the ceiling while trying to scurry under the other lasers bouncing around. He crawls on the floor and I bolt after him. I feel different. I feel reborn.

A laser zaps and I barely need to orb my whole body. I stretch my hand and release a small orb to capture it. I release three more

around me and athletically spin in the air to dodge a fourth. Before I hit the ground I leave two orbs to take care of what's behind me and continue to sprint for my trainer.

This clearly wasn't part of my training. Rhiannon isn't supposed to be in the Battle Room until my session is over.

A laser bounces off a window and beelines for his neck. I hurdle an orb to intercept the blow and the laser gets trapped in the bubble of energy.

Rhiannon gazes up at me, a hint of surprise in his look.

"Keep your head down," I warn him as I send another orb to flank away the next laser. "I got you!"



"Behind you!" he yells.

I spin quickly and the energy flows off my arms so easily it's like breathing. The two lasers in the air explode into a bubble of sparks and I turn to Rhiannon. I drop to his side and scan the room.

Quite a number of lasers still crisscross the arena. By instinct, I raise my palm out and close my eyes. Rhiannon's teachings are to draw the energy out. Maybe the reverse is true.

Feeling the vibrations in the room: the lights, the lasers and the sizzling sensations in the air, I reverse the spell to draw it all in. Slowly, then faster as I befriend the atmosphere. When I open my eyes a

laser is headed for me. But it's slow. And it enters my palm. No stings, no burning sensations. Another beam follows and soon I have red streaks from all directions, coming into me and flowing to my core.

Rhiannon gawks as the room is cleared of lasers. My worn out core is now rejuvenated like a fully charged battery.

"Myla..." He looks around as if there's a word inside this room that can describe the feat I pulled off today.

"That. Was. Wonderful." We both spin around to the voice and see Thea walking over to us in her white robe. "You're a good trainer, Rhiannon."

Rhiannon's face lights up. His cheeks blush and I have something to tease him about. "Thank You."

"I would like to have a word with you."

"That's fine," says Rhiannon.

"Myla is done for the day. We have enough time to talk."

"Actually," she turns her gaze to me, "I'm interested in speaking to Myla."

They always sit at the same table. The one beside the door. Right to the glass wall framing the beautiful landscape: beyond the parking lot a blanket of grass flanking the road and reaching the clouds in the distance. With the heater above their heads, Matty, Sherri and Blake have claimed the coziest booth at Five O'clock.

And that's literally the name of the joint. Sherri's mom decided to give away a package of snacks to one

lucky customer every day at five o'clock.

Matty is all on the new Alita comic on his iPad, ignoring Blake's questions about Charlie and only opening his mouth to tell him how Alita is building her new empire in space.

Sherri gets to the table with donuts smeared in brown, yellow and pink and white, some croissants and three coffee lattés . She works their part time. Sometimes just for the fun of it.

"So, when's your mother coming back?" says Sherri.

"Don't know," says Blake, sipping his juice. "Maybe when she gets bored of her Zen trainer."

"Or maybe when she misses you," she says with a smile. She turns to her brother.

"I've been trying to get his ass off of that ever since we got here," says Blake, "I dig the comic too but he's spitting spoilers. So do you mind if you could sabotage his entertainment?"

"With pleasure," Sherri grins.

Matty barely sees it coming when Sherri grabs the iPad with both hands.

"Hey!"

"Sorry, bro. I was reading *Divergent* before you stole this."

Matty pulls back. "Sherri, cut it out. When I'm done with *Alita* you can read all you want."

"A little help, Blake?"

Blake slides a few inches under the table and sends a sharp kick up Matty's shin. With a jolt he let's go of their shared iPad.

Sherri grins. "Yes!"

"That was *Alita*, man."

"I think we were talking about Charlie."

"Yeah, you boys do that," says Sherri, opening up her novel from her iBooks library.

"Still working it out."

Blake leans in, "And that means?"

"She doesn't like Sherri as much as Sherri doesn't like her. So when I'm with one, the other disappears."

"Like Harry Potter," and Blake feigns a dark sinister voice. "Neither can live while the other survives!"

"Dude, I'm working it out."

Sherri jumps in. "In your free time. While you fix up your new girlfriend and while you won't be reading *Alita*, why not make a comic of your own. Creativity is good to keep you distracted."

"*Alita* gets me distracted!" Matty argues. "And you're robbing me the pleasure."

"It distracts you in the wrong way."

"Is there any right way to be distracted?"

Sherri flips her iPad around to show him the cover of the book on



the screen. "Divergent." She whispers.

"I could use a distraction," says Blake.

Matty laughs. "What happens the next time you see this girl in your dreams? Bang her?"

Sherri shakes her head.

"What? Never dreamed of sex?"

"There's a difference between dreaming of it and hoping to dream of it."

Blake furrows his brows at them. "I don't have any siblings. Is this is a weird conversation for a brother and sister to have?"

"You know what's weird?" says Sherri. "The very fact that you

dream of this Myla girl and you can exchange stuff."

"That's *Harry Potter* type weird, by the way," adds Matty.

"Hey, I didn't ask for this."

"Of course not," Matty sips his juice. "You're the chosen one." He and Sherri share a laugh. "So what's gonna happen tonight?"

"I don't know if I'll see her again. I said goodbye. Got my iPod back."

"Maybe she'll come look for you. Just in case you show up again."

"Which doesn't sound like a good idea," says Sherri. "It's weird enough it happened. We don't need to continue it."

"Hey, I got an idea," says Matty. "Since Myla is our only proof there's

life on other planets why don't you give her a camera so she can take pictures of herself. And maybe even Pandor."

"Uh..." Blake stares blankly. "You really think that's a good idea?"

"You traded iPods and panties. What harm will a camera do?"

"Don't do it Blake," says Sherri. "Call it quits. I don't need the FBI up in our house."

"I think I'll..."

"Yes," Matty begins to grin.

"Or maybe I should not..."

Sherri smiles. "'attaboy!"

"... lose the opportunity to..."

Matty snaps his fingers. "Now you're talking!"

"Oh no," Sherri sinks back.

"...Save myself from..."

Sherri lights up. Matty crosses his arms.

"... from a lack of adventure."

"You're the man!"

"Really?"

"What's the worst that could happen, Sherri?" says Blake.

"I don't know. Maybe this Myla will trap you in a comma so you'll never leave her again. Maybe she'll use you to transport alien battleships to earth!"

"Sounds like Transformers. And by the way when's the next movie coming out?" says Matty.

"As long as Blake keeps this going, I wouldn't be surprised if Rock City ends up like Chicago."

"You're joking, right?" says Blake.

Sherri beams, "I hope I am."

Matty reaches for his backpack and pulls out a slim camera. He slides it over to Blake. "Only one way to find out."

"What did Cinder say?" says Thea. Her eyes are fixed on the glowing pyramids, on top of the mountains that etch into the sky. We're on the outdoor platform, where I usually have my orb practice with Rhiannon. The elements of air and nature help me with the exercises.

"He said my performance was impressive," I say, still dumbfounded that an Elder like Thea would want to speak to me privately in a place like this.

"Anything else?"

"No. That was all."

Her fingers are curled around the railings as she looks over the beauty of Pandor: the tracks that swirl into the jungle, the pathways propped over the treetops and the buildings jutting out of the green.

"How do you think you performed?"

"I think I did what I never did before."

Thea's lips curve into a smile. She looks up, "I noticed you seemed a little frustrated in there."

I look down the Tower. I don't want her to know about my secrets. Even though it's over with Blake I still feel the urge to protect

whatever I had. Whatever could have been.

"Training. And lifestyle. The usual stress."

"Our Hypnotic tones take care of all your stress. If you've been listening to your sessions as you should then you should be fine."

"I do listen to my sessions." I lie. I know they record how long I listen but my bedroom has no cameras. Ever since Blake came around I've been listening to them for barely five minutes. To cheat them I leave the headphones playing on my bed.

"Then what else could be bothering you?" Thea turns to me so I can't hide my eyes. "I'm curious. You used anger to draw out



the best of your potential. What upset you?"

I break contact and look away. I cross my arms on the railings and steer my eyes to the mountains.

"Something personal?"

If I don't come up with something Thea will get suspicious. So I tell her the one thing they probably already suspect.

"My family. I haven't seen them for too long. I don't even know where Mylo is."

"Your little brother," she rests her hand on my shoulder. Which is like lowering her hand because she's freakishly tall. "He's alright. And safe."

"Could I at least talk to him?"

Thea sighs, then tightens her grip on my shoulder. "Myla. You're in a very important stage of your training right now. It's not right to focus on—"

I whack her hand off my shoulder. "Not right to think about my own brother?"

"That's not what I meant—"

"Then what did you mean by that!"

"Myla, calm down. Listen to me." My chest has started to heave.

"Right now you're in a very crucial point of your development. Cinder tried to run you quick today.

Artemis gave him the order to do so. I wanted you to have more time to advance as you should but—"

"There's not enough time?" I finish for her. My gaze slowly turns up to the sky. I remember the recent Shielding. The light enveloping the sky flashes once more in my mind. And now it all begins to make sense. "He's here, isn't he?"

Thea stares back at me, speechless.

I scream.

I'm loud. I'm enraged.

I'm piercing the sky.

I catch my breath. I've never felt a terror like this in my entire life, "Stretaka, is here for me!"

"He can't come through the shield! You're safe here."

"Stretaka is here for me and I can't talk to my own family!"

Thea reaches for my shoulders again, "Myla, you wouldn't understand."

At her touch my insides flare with rage. The Kronite explodes all over me, covering my ankles, wrists and neck bone. In a moment too quick for a second thought I push her away from me and she stumbles along the railings, perplexed at my guts.

"Because I don't speak bullshit!"

I storm away, back into the Major Tower. Thea doesn't call me back. She knows when she's crossed a line. And I know when I've had enough.



I've never been suicidal before. Not in any way. But I was so fed up. If I hadn't pushed Thea away and stormed off I think I would have easily jumped off the railings. It's a long way down. I think you could probably count to a hundred before you hit the ground. In retrospect, I think I'd count to five before Thea would orb up and save me.

Sleep is the only time I can let go of Pandor and its drama and fall into something that doesn't have to

make sense to me. That just has to listen to my feelings and create a reality I will enjoy for a few hours until I wake.

This time again, I find myself running through the woods as if looking for something. Or maybe I'm running away from something I don't want. Or perhaps just for the sake of running.

I stop at a meadow. A weird but dazzling place. There's no sun in the sky, just a blanket of blue and pink hues filled with stars. The world is kindled in a light of its own. Not too bright, just the right kind to make you feel warm. And there's no anger or upsetting feelings here. It's peaceful. And not the Hypnotic

tones kind of peace. But a real and genuine peace. A peace that knows your name, knows the kind of shit you have to go through, respects that and gives you a nice guest room in its shelter. It's funny how the real things lie in my dreams.

Then again, this isn't that much of a dream. The connection I have with everything around me is just too surreal. It's like all of this is inside of me and knows me. Like in some way I created it. And it baffles me by its beauty.

I stroll into the meadow where I can see sharp mountains trying to pin point the stars.

"Myla?"



I freeze under the dazzling sky. The leaves crunch behind me. A warm finger finds its way into my hand and my Kronite quietly begins to spread into my clothes.

"Woah!" he backs away and I turn to see the shock on his face. He points at my chest as the Kronite curves over my breasts. "What the hell is that?"

"Hi, Blake." There's a part of me that's not surprised to see him, and another that wouldn't care less. He still appears startled so I break it to him. "It's called Kronite. A living metal. It protects me from those who cause harm." I glance downward as it wraps itself over my ankles. "I guess it doesn't like you."

"Okay..." He takes a step back.  
"Can you tell your Kronite to back away for a sec. I come in peace."

"And leave me in tears," my hands ball into fists now. There's a soft spot that is happy he is here but I'm not going to open up easy just to get hurt all over again. "I've learned my lesson, Blake."

"Look, I'm sorry for what I said."

"How can you be sorry for being honest?"

"Maybe..." He sighs. "This is new for me, okay? Dreaming with you freaked me out at first. This has never happened to me before. And I didn't like to make you cry."

I am baffled at how easy I let down my guard. The Kronite seeps

back into my belt and I'm no longer gloom and grey and dangerous.

"Me too."

Blake smiles. "You look less life threatening now that's gone."

I can't tell you how it happens but when I open my mouth I laugh. Like I've forgotten everything else. "You were scared?"

Blake comes closer, close enough to hold my hand again and when he does I don't want him to let go. "We don't have living metal in Alaska apparently. Or Earth for that matter."

A big red billboard jumps in my mind: Earth. *Loser Planet!* My guesses were Meteora or Heamus. *Of all places?*

*Act right, Myla, don't let him see this on your face!*

"So what do you have that might interest me?"

He reaches into his shirt and pulls out something I am glad to see again.

"You don't mind if I return this?" he places his iPod in my hand.

"What do you mean return? It belongs to you."

"Not anymore."

The iPod turns in my hands so preciously I wouldn't even let Rhiannon touch it. Maybe Mylo. If I ever see him again I'd let him hold it, if I could.

I turn back to Blake, "So this means you like me now?"

He pats his thighs with his hands.  
"Well... you are beautiful." Then his eyes linger on me but they dance around my face and body so quick it's hard to find out what exactly he's looking at. What's harder is getting my own eyes to lock on his. My blood is boiling but I feel in control.

His eyes finally stop at my lips and my heart pounds. The words jump out of my mouth, so ready and so impatient. "Kiss me."

He chuckles, bringing his hand behind my shoulder as he... *as he plays with my hair!*

"Did you get that from a song too?"

Then his fingers touch my lips and my arm finds his back. He doesn't wait for an answer.

He moves his face in but my nervousness causes me to pull back. I'm dumbstruck in the moment as Blake stares at me.

"You okay?"

*I'm ruining this!*

I can't let this opportunity slip away. I pull myself back and make it happen. This time it's right. Well, at least I think it is. His soft lips are moving over mine and I am holding him close, so desperately.

Blake backs me up against a tree and devours me. He pushes my hair back and I feel so tight in his embrace. He kisses, he bites, he

touches, he does everything and it's so right. It's so perfect and strong. Stronger than all of my strengths combined.

I barely breathe when he comes back with his lips again. I let loose and dance in this fire. My fingers find his shirt and I'm ripping off his buttons, his chest now bare against my body, his heat driving me insane.

I taste him and like him and love him, all that he is. He's all that I want, all I have right now and all I need to be the happiest girl in the universe. When he pulls out I roll my head back and scream at the stars. He laughs into my shoulder and calls me crazy.

The he moves in to kiss my neck. My heart is pounding against my chest. He's turned me into a phoenix. I'm bursting into flames. I am becoming ecstasy.

I wrap my arms around him and rest my head on his shoulder. He continues to kiss my neck and I close my eyes. It's the only thing in the world in want to feel. I lose track of how long we kiss. Time doesn't matter. When he finally stops my face is wet.

"You're a mean kisser."

I take his hand. "And you're mine."

I lead him into the meadow like he's my own. And sit down. I roll his



iPod in my hands and remember what I asked him before.

"Thanks for the iPod. I love it."

He shrugs. "I love you... possibly."

He grins at the look on my face and I fight the blush.

"And there's a chance I could love you too." I give him his iPod. "Your favorite songs?"

"They're too many."

"Play them all."

"That's a lot of songs we're talking about."

"Pick one."

He scrolls his song list and plugs one earphone into my left ear, the other in his right. "*Safe and Sound* by *Fall Out Cities*. I can say they're my favorite band."

He wraps his arm around my waist and lies on the grass. I follow and rest my head beside his. The music plays.

"Woah," Blake stares out. "That sky is awesome."

"I know. The song too."

There are no beats. Just a gentle strum.

"Acoustic guitars," says Blake.

"I've never seen a guitar before."

"Watch the music videos in the video app."

"You mean the little box written video?"

"Yeah."

"I'll check them out."

We listen to a lot of music. All the songs are awesome. But nothing

can match up to the kisses I shared with this boy. My lips are burning and they still want more.

"I almost forgot to give you this." Blake hands me another shiny device. But it's thicker than the iPod and has a lens in the front.

"A camera?" I guess.

"Yeah," he smiles. "You know how it works?"

"I think so."

"I told a friend of mine about you and he wants to see Pandor. Well, I want to too but he gave me the idea of giving you a camera."

"You talk about me?" Like it's the only thing I heard.

"Only with my two best friends."

I can't help the smile on my face.  
*And why would I? He's talking  
about me!*

"Sure. I'll take pictures for you." I  
press a button and the camera  
comes on. "How about us?"

"Why not?" he edges closer and I  
raise the camera over our faces,  
hoping I've got the right distance.

"A little closer."

I pull back a few inches and when  
the air is warm and everything feels  
right, I capture the moment in a  
flash. All that I've dreamed of and  
all that I've asked. All in one flash  
that leaves me on my bed with one  
hand still stretched into the air, the  
camera still in my grip.

Blake's iPod is beside my waist,  
one earphone in my ear, the other  
dangling off the edge of my bed.  
The smile on my face is so big I  
could swallow the camera if it  
dropped. I turn it around and on  
the little screen is a perfect picture  
of a perfect moment, framed in that  
little box.

"You kissed her!" Sherri throws her arms up.

"I thought you'd do better than that," says Matty.

Sherri shoots him a glare and elbows his side. "Ouch!"

Blake watches his friends's reactions from the other side of the table at Five O'clock. Their Xtra-literature book for the year, *The Hunger Games* rests in the middle of their POP, chicken rolls and garlic bread.

"She got my camera?"

"Yeah," says Blake.

"Oh no," Sherri buries her face on the table. Her hands fall on her head.

"Awesome man!"

"Guys, is this right?" says Sherri.

"Oh wait," she looks up and swipes a glance around them. "I'm asking the wrong people."

"What could go wrong?" says Blake.

"For starters you kissed her. Now she thinks you love her and who knows..." Sherri's eyes turn to slits, laser-focused on a fact she can't believe she missed was right there on his face. "... unless you really *do* like her!"

"Well..." Blake searches for a word to begin with but he can't defend the truth and Matty begins to laugh and point fingers while stuffing chicken rolls with his other hand.

"You should join the cast for *Harry Potter and the Girl from Outer Space*," Sherri takes her POP and drinks it all down.

"What's wrong with an inter-galactical relationship?" says Matty.

"Everything is wrong with that! Every darn spooky thing!"

"What about that movie... uh what was it..."

"*The Girl From Mars*." says Blake.

Matty snaps his fingers. "Yeah. *The Girl From Mars*. The dude had a crush on this alien girl who came



to earth and they got married. See?  
There's nothing wrong with  
showing some love."

Sherri pouts and turns away. She  
stares back at the chicken rolls, eyes  
empty like she's lost her appetite.

"If it makes you better, there's no  
way she can come to earth. So you  
don't have to fret on that," says  
Blake.

Sherri stares out the glass wall.  
"That's all right. I already got my  
own pain in the ass right here."

When Blake turns to the window  
and sees Charlie sauntering toward  
the café Sherri is already out of her  
seat and heading for the door beside  
the counter.

"Sherri, hold up!" Blake races up to her.

"I've got to get back to my job, Blake. Can we talk later?"

He takes her hand and begins to lead her to the door. "No."

"Whatever, let's do this quick," she slides her beanie over the back of her head and follows Blake outside as Charlie waltzes right by them and takes a seat beside Matty.

"So?"

Sherri sighs, "Matty's splitting his time. Like now we were sitting together but when she shows up, I get to my job. It's better that way."

They slowly walk across the curb, almost as if eavesdropping on the

customers on the other side of the glass.

"Doesn't seem like you like the plan."

"What else can we do? If Matty's gonna keep dating Charlie then this is the best compromise. I don't want him to do drugs again."

Blake gives her an empathetic look before turning to their blue truck. "Okay. Time for a blue truck talk."

It's something they've been doing for years. They sit on the edge of the trunk of the pickup and... pretty much just talk about whatever is bothering them. Especially when someone's got some great advice.

Blake shows her to the back of the pickup and they carry themselves onto the truck. He taps the blue metallic edge, "Right here."

She slides closer. They gaze out at the grass, the scattered flowers and the blue sky that could easily put a smile on her face if she had a glass of orange juice.

"What do you want?"

"What do I want?" says Sherri.

"Yeah. For yourself."

She takes a deep breath. "I want... to be happy. I want my best buddy here," she nudges him, "...to be happy. And I want... a guy who doesn't treat me like trash. Who can acknowledge what I feel and handle me carefully like a melting candle."

"Because he knows you got flames," Blake strokes her hair and she laughs.

"Yup! My flames. They can burn ya!"

"Ow!" Blake whisks his hand off her hair and blows his finger. "Too hot!"

"Haha, careful next time," she leans in and he puts his arm around her. "What about you? And your new dream girl?"

"What haven't I told you?"

"Do you really like her?"

Blake is silent for a while. She can sense the doubt. "You're not sure?"

He looks down and shakes his head. "It's weird. You know? The I-am-too-young-for-this weird."

"I getcha."

"I like her. And I also don't want to see her again. But then I get excited with each dream. I want someone normal."

"Trust me, normal just ends up breaking your heart. Normal sucks. Maybe I'd like Myla a bit more if I had dreams of some sexy Italian from Jupiter who's never seen a girl before so he's just crazy about me."

Blake comes quick, "You need a boyfriend."

"I do," Sherri chuckles. "And you need to get your shit straight, sooo..."

She gets off the truck and jogs to the grass at the edge of the parking

lot. She returns with a blue flower with plenty of petals.

"What is this?"

"A flower, dumbass," she smiles as he reaches down for it. "You love her?" She bobs her head with a sad face. "Or you love her not? Start plucking, man. I got a job to get back to."

Sherri heads back inside. Blake sighs, turning his attention to the flower.

*She's got to be kidding!*

He begins to pluck the petals off, one by one and then two by two to pace up. *I love her. I don't. I love her. I don't. Dammit! There are so many petals on this flower! What*

*kind is this anyway? I love her. I don't. I love her. I don't...*

He takes a glance back at the bakery and Sherri is serving a cappuccino to an old man. She bends up and there's a moment of eye contact that is quickly broken when she turns her attention to another customer. Blake returns to the blue flower.

Three more petals.

*I don't.*

*I love her.*

One last petal.

*If I loved someone would I ever doubt it?*



The milk-white metallic walls surround me like a well. When I spread my arms my palms almost touch the icy cold surface. I look through a narrow and vertical strip of glass in the wall, to the other side, where the entire team is watching me. Cinder stands beside Rhiannon, studying me on his Nanotop. There is a flock of scientists operating the equipment, seated in concentric rows going all

around the facility. And there is an Elder today.

Phoebe.

After my outstanding performance yesterday they are now rushing me to advanced orb trainings. They expect me to fly in a week. That's why Phoebe is here today. To watch everything for himself. His arms are crossed over his white robe, eyes shooting at me like laser beams.

"On three!" says Rhiannon. I pick him up in the bud in my ear. Apart from his voice, everything else in here is utter silence, vacant and ghostly and making the air still and solid. My heartbeats are like a drum in my chest, pounding as I hear the

countdown. I take a deep breath and straddle my legs.

*This should be easy.*

On three I raise my arms up, forming a star posture and as easily as yesterday, the energy flows, forming an orb around me instantly.

Rhiannon and a couple of scientists share a short round of claps. Phoebe is motionless. Still eyeing me like I'm lunch.

"Alright, Myla. Here's the big one!"

I gaze above my head. The round ceiling opens to reveal a gigantic bulb. I have to fly there. This is the part I've never really done well before.

"Now up!"

But it's easy. I tilt my palms to the walls and there I go. Off the floor and into the air. Phoebe's killer shark gaze follows me up until the glass strip is no more as I travel into the bulb, where they can only see me on their Macrotop monitors.

I fly into a vast space. The expanse walls are a mosaic of triangles, glittering in blue and red. They begin to flash. First a few and then many. I wander up into the center of the bulb where I am washed in a crossfire of blue and red, fighting for dominance. They keep flashing all over the bulb like a million photographs, without any logical order.

In a crazy way it puts a smile on my face. Trainings are always uptight but this one is different. I don't have a laser trying to tase me into smoke. I don't have to fight drones or have my memory temporarily blocked. I swim through in my orb. Thrusting forward and gliding back. Circling, swirling. Up and down. Like a zero gravity dance.

Orbing has never been so easy. I glide back to the epicenter of the bulb where the battle between the colors is the most intense. I linger like a little red ladybug on a leaf, wondering when they'll release me.

"Rhiannon, I think I'm done with my training (*done with my*

*training*). I've orbbed pretty well, (*I've orbbed pretty well*)," my voice sounds three times louder in the bulb. When there's no reply I give it a second shot. "Is Thea supposed to come (*Is Thea supposed*) give me flying lessons?(*give me flying lessons?*)"

All that responds to my echoes is more blue and more red, lighting up.

"Rhiannon, this isn't funny (*this isn't funny*). Why aren't you responding? (*aren't you responding?*)"

The colors flash rapidly as I float toward the center. I absentmindedly spin upside-down towards the heart of the entire bulb.

Suddenly, the entire room is transformed into space and stars.

"Holy shit!"

I'm in the middle of a live 3D galaxy. The stars are swirling around me like the fish I see out at night as the display flows in circles. The beauty of stars. The horror of darkness.

I am stolen.

The stars zoom closer to me and I can almost touch them if not for my orb. There's a sensation to it. A warm tickle up my spine. The feeling doesn't last long when it's invaded by my shock of the stars bursting into sparks.

Waves of sparkling chunks of light crash over my orb and slide off the

energy field like pyrotechnics  
exploding in space while hiding in a  
bubble.

When the sparks fall to the  
bottom of space, battleships break  
into the scene. Hundreds of them  
speeding past me. Out of the red  
stardust and into the war. It's all  
happening around me. Lasers  
exchanged. Glimpses of fire burst  
and disappear in snaps.

In an instant the scene changes to  
a man's face. A terrifying hologram  
so big it could swallow me. His red  
dreadlocks could swat me away like  
a bug.

"I'm afraid it's the only way," he  
says. His bloodshot eyes are  
alarmed and they make my heart



race. My Kronite seeps into my clothes.

"I must do this to save Pandor and the Universe."

I peer closer and realize his eyes are aimed behind me. I make a quick turn and there's no one there expect for the metallic walls of a battleship, an extension of the panoramic hologram.

"Tell my people that I love them," he says. His face turns around and the image zooms out that I can see him standing on a steel platform, facing a small window. The floors and walls in the projection are silvery grey.

The scene is washed away with stars again. Chasing themselves

around me. This time they recede. I squint in the darkness and notice a black whirlpool spinning up my head. The battleships swirl in the circles. They closer they get the smaller they become. The ships right outside my orb are the size of paper planes.

Everything gets sucked from the bottom of the bulb and enters the whirlpool. With an eruption of great white light, the Golgorians are gone. There is no sound. Just empty space.

My eyes hold the images of what I've just witnessed, pulsing in and out of focus as I try to project it in the dark. Without warning, the blue and red flicker again to signal the

end of the show. A door opens in my exist. I float down the white tube and de-orb once my feet hit the ground.

The images I saw still sparkle in my sight. I land my palms against the walls because it's making me a little dizzy. The door slides open and I try not to trip as I come out. Phoebe is the first person I see. Behind him Rhiannon is wearing his you-did-a-good-job smile and Cinder, as usual, on the Nanotop. In the peripheral Thea is smiling back at me but it doesn't make me feel smug.

"Your flying was good. But I have a question for you," says Phoebe.

"Do you know who you saw in the bulb?"

"Capricorn."

"And do you know what he left you?"

"His three laws."

Phoebe brings his hands behind his back, "State."

"The First Law of Capricorn: Peace is an illusion and the leaders have power over that illusion.

"The Second Law of Capricorn: Protect the most important life, everyone else is expendable.

"The Third Law of Capricorn: If caught, a Lebra must commit suicide to preserve the secrets of Pandor."

"Right there," Phoebe points out.  
"Capricorn died for us. And we've enjoyed peace for more than a hundred blue moons."

"And now you want me to die too?" I blurt. When Phoebe beams at me I realize it wasn't the smartest thing to say. It's something we've been going around for a long time. The possibility of what will happen when the enemy captures me.

"No," he clears. "I want you to obey the laws."

"And you know what the laws say," I counter.

"We are not hoping for that situation."

"Phoebe!" my voice is up a notch.  
"This isn't about hope. Stretaka is

behind our blue sky. Waiting for a breach."

"A breach that will never happen. Our security has taken care of all our concerns," Cinder cuts in.

I press harder, "Am I ready to fight Stretaka? What does your data say?"

"You have more training to do. What do you think this is?" says Cinder.

"I've been training for blue moons!"

"It takes more than just training!" Phoebe blares. His voice echoes throughout the room, reverberating across the concentric rows of desks. Everyone falls silent, watching us from behind their Macrotops. He

beams down at me again, so close that I can see the swollen veins in his forehead. "You're not ready."

Making that clear he heels away. Thea is silent in the corner and Rhiannon slowly walks up to me.

"He's here for me." My voice shrills. Battle scenes haunt my mind.

"He will never take you," Rhiannon takes my hand.

"If you stopped lying to her so much she'd probably believe you," says Cinder.

"Cinder!" Thea casts him a glare but it's too late. I'm already storming out of the room. And I think I'm crying. There is a boy I

love and a life I can't live. How do  
you make the two work?



I want to kiss him again.

I'm home now and there are no mind sensors to stop me from reliving my night from different angles. The way he backed me up against that tree. The way the leaves fell as his lips synced with mine. The way I freaked out when he came in and how I got used to it in the process. This is my first kiss on replay. And the next ones that followed down my neck. It was like a dream in a dream. Like a moment

in space and time detached from all the other moments of life. Like a piece too big for a puzzle that you have to put it aside where you can see is separately. And beautifully.

That's what I'm doing right now. Standing in the shower and feeling my face and lips and neck. I wish I hadn't been scared. But then again, it was my first. And I'm so anxious to do it again. Maybe this time I'll take the lead.

The prospect of it makes my insides stiff. All that natural lubrication between my guts has gone and I'm carrying rocks in my stomach.

*Rocks, rocks, rocks.*

I know it's quite crazy to carry on with a relationship. Especially with all that's happening. But you never get a second chance at a life like this. So why not give it all you got? Sometimes you need to come out of the cage and attack life with both hands.

I get to my room to change into something suitable. Dip back shorts and a T. I reach for the iPod under my pillow beside the camera (holy crap I'm supposed to take pictures with that!) when the buzzer rings and the automated voice fills the house.

**Rhiannon wishes to Teleport.**

*What does he want now?*

"Permit." I slide the iPod back under and walk out to my living room. But Rhiannon is not there.

*That's odd! He's supposed to be here by now.*

I head to the Teleportation Chamber and stand a foot away from the plastic curtain.

"Rhiannon?"

"Myla!"

It's not his voice.

The Kronite shoots up and before I can act a hand jumps out the curtain and drags me in. I'm about to scream before another hand cups my mouth.

"Relax. Relax," whispers the voice.  
"Don't move."

I wriggle my arms out of his grip and spin around. I sweep a kick and the man catches my leg in midair.

"Myla, it's me!"

I reach for his collar and back him up against the wall. He let's go of my leg. I raise my arm, ready to fist him down until it hits me: he's not fighting back.

"Myla!"

"Who are you!"

"It's me... take a step back."

I keep my fist in the air, breathing rapidly, contemplating whether it's a good idea. His face is shielded by the darkness. I can barely see him. But he's not attacking. I decide to step back to the opposite side of the

chamber where a band of light falls across his face.

"Dad!"

He nods his head, "Yes, hun."

"You're not supposed to be here," I whisper. But I'm overjoyed he is.

"Listen up. Rhiannon and Thea did me a favor. The mics are temporarily off but only for a moment. I came to give you this."

Out of his khaki jacket he pulls out what you'd call an ostrich egg at first glance. But it's something way more precious than that.

"A spore!"

He places it in my hands. It glows instantly, like a little fairy waking up inside a snow-globe.

"Now we can talk all we want. Cup it in your hands until it calibrates to your thought waves."

"Gosh, dad! You know how awesome this is!"

He kisses my cheeks and forehead. "Why don't you tell me on the call. I've got to go now. Take care, Myla. And one more thing: I believe in you."

He pulls me in for a tight hug. I want him to hang out with me longer.

"I must go now. I love you. Goodbye my dear."

I step out of the Port, one hand holding my spore. The other waving at him as a zap of light steals him away from me.

He's gone.

*And I have a spore!*

I rush to my room where my other valuable gifts lie and jump on my bed. I cross my legs and hold the spore in my hands, smiling. The light inside grows brighter and then fades down a little, getting acquainted to me.

*"Hi, there! I'm Myla. Welcome to my home."*

I chuckle at myself.

When it responds to me like a friend, my heart jumps with joy.

*Hi, Myla. Give me a name. I am your spore.*



It can feel my thoughts and hear my voice.

I'm tempted to use Blake but wouldn't want any suspicions. I want to keep him safe and way out of Pandor where they can't hurt him.

*"How about I call you Xena. Like my friend."*

*Xena... thank you, Myla. I like that name. Calibration complete. You have only one contact: Dad. Wish to add more?*

*"No. Thank you, Xena."*

The light fades out and Xena is off. Elated with rainbows in my chest I fall back onto my bed and

reach under my pillow. I want to listen to more music. I want to touch the stars again. I want to forget my life. I want to escape into streams of sounds, electric echoes and heart pounding beats. The excitement. The magic. The ecstatic emotions that travel through the buds, into my ears, awakening a deeper part of me I lost a long time ago.

But my hand finds the camera and Blake wants pictures. A mischievous grin conquers my face.

*I think I know a way to do this.*

I'm standing over a bridge overlooking the beach—a long stretch of sand connecting the horizons. And curving in.

The paths are currently full of people walking home, some cruising on their Air-Scooters. They're a culture that doesn't trust Teleportation technology and would rather use traditional means. A group of school girls giddy behind me as I lean forward against the railings.

*They must be from their  
Engagement classes.*

I remember when I used to have those with Xena. Everything was so simple then. I didn't have to worry about some monstrous, whirlpool of darkness hovering in space, waiting on me.

Life was a breeze. Like the coconut tree swaying over my head. Life was like the ocean, crashing on the beach without a price to pay for it. The tides that hit home and roll back into the waters, as if nature's elements had ways of talking, kissing and making jokes to each other.

I hold the camera in front and isolate the sounds of kids playing

behind me to focus on the picture  
I'm about to snap: the balls  
bouncing on the beach, girls and  
boys running around and the  
houses floating on the ocean ahead  
as the waves smash against their  
glass walls.

A light escapes my camera and the  
photo is in. And I'm wearing a  
smile. It's not because I'm taking  
pictures for Blake (or his friend).  
It's because I've finally broken the  
leash and gotten myself out here  
where it's okay to be carefree and  
run loose. It's okay to be normal. To  
be me. Or to at least find out who  
the hell that girl could be.

She may be beginning to become a  
free bird in a few ways. But she's

still a lost pearl. And as the clock keeps ticking with heavier training sessions underway, I may not have all that time to figure out who I am.

And I don't want Stretaka to help me with that either.

I take a couple more photos as I walk along the bridge. It's a good thing nobody notices me. I bet most have never seen me ever since the day I was chosen. And I was really young then. I easily stroll through the crowd and view the hills and the jungle.

Blake would love to see it.

*What's the best vantage point?*

I look up at the sky—*dammit!*—Thea flies over in her orb. My head is down and I pretend to be tying

my shoe laces...*I think she's gone.* I look up.

*Close one!*

The Major Tower stands nearby, spearing through the clouds. I think I just found the best vantage point. It's a risk I'm willing to take. And the pros are persuasive. The tower is guarded by clone soldiers, not real ones. And all I need is one trip through the Vine to my next photo shooting spot.

I'm going for it.

One good thing about being a Lebra is that I have instant access to any place in the Major Tower. Once I'm at the entrance the doors split into five to let me in and I'm

sauntering through two lines of soldiers.

It's the first time I'm doing this without Rhiannon and there's an awesome feeling of independence to it. The glowing elevators are straight ahead and I'm spinning up the Vine in no time.

There's a chance they will know I came here today. I could easily say I wanted to do some more practice. It may not be convincing but I got my lines if they ever ask why I left home. I got that big question all taken care of.

*Damn, talk about being a bird who wants out!*

When I'm finally on the right floor it's only a few twists and turns until



I get out to my Outdoor Training platform. The only outdoor platform on the Tower I've seen so far.

I run to the railings and stop before I slip my ass off the Tower. I get my camera out and tap it on. The lens zooms. I steady my feet for a great panoramic photo.

I turn around, capturing the rolling hills, the glowing pyramids on the mountains, the translucent dome of Arius, our sister planet, arching over the beautiful jungle like one giant cookie in the sky, outlined with a nice silver edge like on a crescent moon. The tip of the planet is a belly button of clouds swirled together, moving so

patiently as I stare. I turn the camera towards the extremely tall trees on the far end that make the sky and clouds on that section turn green.

I switch to video for a more personal take. I move to the far left corner and record as I walk along the length of the railings.

"Hey, Blake! Welcome to Pandor. This is Doris. My home city."

As I walk I tell him about the Elder's pyramids, the jungle and how the trees grow so high in the distance. When I approach the end there's a bright glowing dome hunched in between the jungle, close to the beach.

"... and that little dome is way bigger than it looks. It's where I have my Amnesia Trials. Inside of it is a replica of Doris. Half of it is built underground. Amnesia Trials aren't my favorite trainings but what can a Lebra say? I'm forced to fight under conditions of not knowing who I am.

"My trainer, Rhiannon, says I have to do it so the enemy doesn't get me on their radars that sense my thought waves... or something like that. Which I think is stupid because I'm already fighting them.

"Anyway, love, that's the end of our little tour. Hope you like Pandor. But I hope you don't come

here. It sucks ass. Believe me. Love you, Blake. I love you so much!"

I press again to end the recording. I sigh and let my arms drop on the railings.

*That was amazing!*

My gasp of awe is interrupted when I hear the door sliding open. In a jolt the camera is back in my pocket. The footsteps come and my intuition already knows who it is.

"Cinder." I don't even have to turn my gaze away from the stars that have just started to appear in the sky.

"What are you doing away from home?"

"Enjoying the view. What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you. And whatever lies in your pocket. I ask you again. What are you doing here?"

I turn around. I guess I wasn't quick enough.

"I'm not doing anything wrong."

"You're supposed to have dinner in five minutes and this is where you are. We've been looking for you. You have any idea how much trouble you just caused for yourself?"

I raise my hands and it's like wind rushing up my arms. Two orbs form around my hands. "I think I can take it."

Cinder raises his hand and the veins in his face pop along his forehead as he fights to produce an

orb. It comes out small and flickering.

"You know that I orb way better than you."

As soon as the words are out of my mouth I realize what Cinder is doing. My orbs shrink as his enlarges. Bit by bit. I close my hands to end the game. Our orbs disappear. "Smart move."

Cinder readjusts his majestic pose, inundated with narcissism. "I'm not as weak as you think." He snarls. Then lets out a hand.

"What's in the pocket."

It's not a question. It's a demand. My heart is galloping and I'm happy he didn't bring out the Nanotop this time so he could get the stats. When

he approaches the Kronite twists  
into my clothes once again and  
Cinder grits hard on his teeth,  
shooting me a laser glare.

"Get it if you can." I say and stroll  
right by him.

As I near the door I hear him call  
out, "Artemis won't be happy about  
this!"

I close my eyes and reach deep  
within.

*I don't care.*

"Mylo, she's on the spore!" says Elia.

The young boy jumps from the table, leaving his bananas and salad dinner and rushes over the red carpet imprinted with a picture of his sister. He scurries over the image of her face as he peels into the next room where Elia is waiting for him with the spore in her hands. It glows in a gentle pulse, as if it had a tiny heart.



The boy's caretaker pats on the couch beside her lap and Mylo leaps on. She passes the spore to him and his legs are already kicking the wind.

"So excited!" says Elia.

Mylo beams at the spore and practically shouts his sister's name. "MYLA! MYLA ARE YOU THERE!"

There's laughter in the room. It's coming from Elia. And as Mylo presses his hear to the spore, he's sure he can hear his sister laughing out tears.

"Can you hear me?" says Mylo.

"Yes! Yes!" Myla croaks. "I can hear you. Loud and clear."

"When are you coming back, Myla?" says Mylo. "Dad always talks

about you but I never get to see you."

"I wish I could see you too, Mylo. But I'm so busy every day."

"Mom says you're a Lebra."

"I am."

"Does that make you important?"

"Um... to you," Myla laughs.

"You're always important to me. I want to see you, Myla!"

"Easy there," says Elia, rubbing the boy's shoulders.

"One day I'll make it happen."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Promise me I'll see you. Before the bad things start to happen."

Elia fazes into a worried look as she slowly turns to Mylo. She can

sense Myla's speechless expression, hanging in the void of shock.

"I heard Elia and mom talking last night."

"That's enough little guy. Time for your shower," says Elia.

"Wait!" Myla snaps. "Mylo... I'm okay, alright? We're all going to be fine. Cinder is making sure we're protected."

"Are you sure, Myla?"

"Time for a bath, Mylo. Say goodbye to your sister—"

"Please! Give us some time," Myla shrivels through the room. "Don't make him go."

"Myla, I think we should get back later," says Elia.

"How are you sure?" Mylo pushes.

"Because Cinder is good and responsible."

"But mom says you don't like Cinder—"

Elia scoops the boy in her arms and marches to the bathroom as Myla's last shaken breaths glow in the spore as it rolls on the couch.

"How does Mylo know about this?"

"I'm sorry, Myla. Your little brother is a skilled eavesdropper," says dad.

"Well, obviously. He has a sister he's never met before, I'd expect him to try to find out as much about me as he can."

"Don't worry about, Mylo. He'll be okay."

"They won't make him listen to those binaural beats?"

"The ones for memory loss? No way," says dad. "The Elders do not interfere with Mylo's life. Elia will take care of everything there. And she's on our side."

"Thanks, dad. But I think they've already interfered with his life a great deal."

I hear my dad sigh and it makes me clutch my stomach. I was excited to talk to him on the spore for the first time and when Mylo came in it was like stars in the sea. Now my concern for him has got the best of me.

"How are you doing?"

"Fine..."

"Doesn't sound very *fine*." My dad can read me like a Nanotop. I'm

happy he's used the skill to change the subject.

"It sucks. What can I say? This isn't what I wanted."

"This is never what anyone wants."

"And why does it have to be me?"

"Well, think about it this way. If it wasn't you, what if it was Mylo? Hmm?"

I take a breath. "That does sound like it's a little worth it. I'm glad Mylo doesn't have to deal with the prospect of being—"

"Don't say it, Myla. Don't dare what you don't want, remember?"

"I know. But it's coming and Phoebe knows I'm not ready. Rhiannon knows it too. But he just

feeds me lies of how good I am and how safe I'll be."

"Same thing you told Mylo... Listen. There's nothing wrong about lying to someone so they feel better, safer and happier."

"But it's not true. We can say all what we want but the truth is that it's not there. The opposite is happening."

"You're wrong. It's never about what's happening. It all comes down to the present moment... what are you feeling now?"

"What?"

"Don't look too far, the stars are only visible at night."



*Baby, when they see us in the sky  
We'll be crashing through the  
night*

*They'll be freaking out 'cause  
we're so bright*

*Yeah, we're so beautiful*

*We're so freaking beautiful*

*Like an X-mark of shooting stars*

*Come up in my head*

*Explode, like fireworks!*

I think it's the art of anticipation. When it starts the beats are quietly chasing each other like atoms around a molecule. And as you wait for the big clash, they come out of the muffle and into focus. They're no longer oscillating between my ears. One soft pounding claims the left ear bud, another louder one in the right. They start competing for my attention, each getting louder like I have to choose one to love.

Music is the best escape I have. I can't leave Pandor and I know I'll be in trouble for sneaking out and possibly for my insubordination to Cinder but like I said, knowing what's waiting for me in the sky and with the horror of what could

happen to me, that's the least of my problems. And if Artemis can see what matters in the dark, he'll know better than to bother a girl like me for getting some fresh air.

The lights are out in my bedroom and I'm a starfish on my bed. I lazily watch the Lunabees swirling out the window as the music plays.

*It's beating in my heart  
I'm freaking out  
Baby, I'm freaking out  
So loud  
Yeah, we're so beautiful  
We're so freaking beautiful  
Like double rainbows in your  
eyes  
When you look at me*

*Just wanna explode, like  
fireworks!*

It feels like I'm climbing a mountain. In a way that doesn't make you tired. You feel you're going higher and higher effortlessly.

The sounds paint a picture in my mind of the boy I love. With double rainbows in his eyes that make me want to explode. Next time I see him, I'll look out for those double rainbows. You never know, I just might find them. And maybe he'll see an X-mark of shooting stars in my eyes. I think that will truly make us star-crossed lovers. Or... it may mean that I've blacked out just like in the cartoons in his iPod.

I may not have told you 'cause  
*ugh!* You know the way my day goes  
at the Major Tower. Anyway,  
*Pokemon, Kids Next Door* and  
*Scooby Doo* have conquered my  
early mornings and they will  
conquer my night again. Especially  
that yellow charming fluff of  
lightning.

*Pikachu.*

I wish he didn't have to be caged  
in a tiny red and white ball. Even in  
good people there can sometimes be  
too much power. And I don't mind  
being powerless because I've  
learned that I can't do much to  
change that.

I just don't like to be owned.

I want to explode. To fill the air  
and sky and find my X-mark of  
shooting stars. I agree with *Fergie*  
on this.

I want to be fireworks.

"You want to be fireworks?"

"Uh-huh!"

"Have you been listening to  
*Fergie?*"

"Yes," I grin. I guess I just couldn't wait to tell Blake when he came around. We're lying in the meadow. Facing each other. He's flat. I'm supporting myself with my elbow, looking into his eyes and I can see from his expression he already knows what I'm looking for.

"You won't find any double rainbows here. Sorry." He chuckles.

I punch his arm and tell him to hold still.

"What?"

I cup my hand around his chin so he doesn't move. I look in deep. He's still as a statue, staring back at me, staring at him.

"Why does the double rainbow in your eyes look like me?"

Blake laughs. "Silly! It's your reflection!"

"Like I wouldn't know." I keep staring at him and in my favor he doesn't move. He's good at being a rock. And I'm good at melting. Every other program is shutting down and there's some hot liquid



seeping through my guts, daring me to take the lead and just do it.

I don't get it. If we've kissed before why should I be so damn nervous about doing it again?

I think he takes the cue that I'm biting my lip when his hand reaches for my face and I know my time is up. I crash on his lips.

His hand moves up my neck. I get to his upper lip first—which I think is breaking the rules of kissing. Xena once told me the boy kisses the upper lip first.

But this isn't Maths. And it doesn't have to be because we're syncing so well I don't think our lips know any rules. They're moving and communicating in a way only they

can understand. As my body temperature soars I understand there is no way I can plan a kiss so natural. Like being so skilled at something on your first try.

I squeeze my body into his pelvis. I can't help it. I want him to consume me. He wraps his arms around me and my ability to think suffers a sudden death. His warmth engulfs me. It's passion. Like I'm drunk or high or something.

Whatever happens next is out of the control of my trained mind. Something else is taking over. Guiding me as we roll on the grass, as I suck his lips and as he nibbles mine back.

The moment he shifts his weight off me I gasp at the stars... and the strobes of light swirling through the mountain peaks.

I turn my head and catch his gaze, softly looking back at me.

"You're beautiful. So freaking beautiful."

I smile, "I thought quoting songs was my crime."

"Well, if they lock you up in a cage for that, I'd like to be right beside you."

I can't explain it. Not even to myself. As soon as I register those words they ignite a reaction that makes me jolt. My lips are on his faster than I can think about what I'm doing.

I grip his clothes almost as much as I can bite this boy up and I don't stop until I'm breathless. I'm back on the ground again, gasping for air. Blake doesn't faze. He doesn't forget to breathe when we kiss. I'll just have to develop the skill with time, and with more dreams I guess.

"The cage is not a good place," I say.

"Even with me in it?"

"That would be sweet. But then they'd put you in another cage because they don't want anyone to be with me. Like what they did with my family. My parents are in one cage. I'm in another. And my little brother, Mylo is in a cage far far

away and I can't see where it is. At least you're here. No one can take you away from me."

"Am I able to say the same?"

I turn to Blake. His expression is genuine. "I am a Lebra. Right now it means I've got to prepare to fight against my enemies."

"I could help."

"Haha. Please don't. It's way too dangerous."

"And what do your enemies want?"

I sigh. This is the question I didn't want to answer. But I don't want to lie to him the way I did with Mylo.

"Me."

He jerks back. "Why?"

I begin to tell him about Stretaka and the Great War. "... What's left of him is a mind. He's like a storm of dark clouds, cruising in space. Waiting to find me."

"And when he does?"

"You don't wanna hear it."

He strokes my arm. His fingers slide between mine. "I think I do."

I take a breath.

Here it is.

"Okay, what does a mind wandering in space want with a girl with powerful strengths?"

Blake looks away for a clue. And then back. "I can't think of anything other than... it wants some revenge. Maybe to kill you because he was almost killed by a Lebra."

"Worse," my gaze does not waver away. "He wants my body."

I freeze him. He is motionless.

"Your body?"

"He wants to destroy who I am and fill me up with who he is. This girl you see... she won't be Myla. She'll be Stretaka. And she'll be invincible. She'll have all my powers and his own. There will be no stopping her."

"And that's why they hide you in a cage?"

I purse my lips, "Yes. For my own good."



I'm surprised to even admit that. There are films on my eyes but they quickly disappear. This world doesn't allow for tears. It's a happy place. Negativity isn't compatible here.

"So what do we do?"

"There's nothing we can do, Blake. Except... hope Stretaka never gets through the Shield. It's the only thing keeping him out there."

I sigh. But then I'm filled with joy again. "Anyway," I get on my feet and pace back to where I sat down earlier when I was waiting on Blake. I pick up the camera and give it back to him. "I got your pictures!"

"Awesome," he turns it over and I stop his finger before he can turn it on.

"Not now. Wait till you wake up."

He shrugs. "Deal. Thanks, Myla. Can't wait to wake up."

I punch his arm, "Heck no! I want you to stay!"

He laughs, "You better get to bed earlier then."

"I do. You're the one who's always late to arrive."

"Sorry. I DJ at a night club called Neon twice a week."

"Hey! A date's a date. Even if you have to fall asleep to get here. You still gotta be on time."

Blake laughs and sits back on elbows. "You know you're the sweetest girl I've met?"

"I guess it's why they call her the girl of your dreams."

"Yeah... that's you. You know, Matty and I have this comic we dig. It's not as popular like *Spider-man* or *X-men* but—"

"*Spider-man*! Like his mom's a spider?"

"No silly. That's cartoon stuff. Comics are a little more realist...tic than cartoons... in a way I guess. *Spider-man* actually shoots webs out of his hands and he swings around buildings."

"I wanna read the *Spider-man* comic!"

"I'll bring them next time.

Anyway, Matty and I love *The Alita comic series*. It's about some space girl in a ship and the crew is lost in space. They barely know who they are. They only know they have a mission to get to some planet, find some missing time machine that will take them home..."

"Oh! So this Matty thinks I'm the space girl?"

"He calls us, DJ and the Space Girl."

"Sounds like a story."

"hope it has a good ending."

The dark feeling of the future crawls back but it can't stand the light from the stars. It can't get close.

"Like *Scooby Doo*."

"Yeah. It always has good endings."

"They always win the case."

"I even got you a little *Scooby Doo* story book I used to read when I was a kid."

"No way!"

Blake gets up and walks behind a tree. He comes back with a little book and my heart is skipping foolishly. I've always heard of books but we don't use them at all in Pandor. It's history there.

As soon as he comes back I'm already flipping pages and pointing at my favorite characters. "*Daphne! Fred! Shaggy!*"

"*Scooby and Velma.*"

"I know all of them. They're my favorite gang! Thanks so much, baby!"

"It's just a book."

I whack his hand, "Don't you ever say it's just a book. This is so much. It's an artifact. It's a treasure. It's a story."

"Alright, alright. I just got one question. Which character you love the most?"

I glance at the cover of the book. They're all standing in front of the *Mystery Machine Van*. "I love all of them. I like *Velma* because she's so smart and *Daphne* is hot like me," I grin and he sways into me playfully. "I like *Shaggy* the most. He's the funniest. And *Scooby* too. They're

so carefree. Not the smallest concern for life."

"We could live like that, you know?" Blake's eyes connect with mine. He holds them. "We could forget all our concerns and be like *Shaggy* and *Scooby*."

"Forget all about Stretaka."

"Carefree. Not the smallest concerns. You like that?"

"I want that!"

"You got that. Right here."

He moves in to kiss me again. I close my eyes and there are no concerns. There is no fear about the future. There is only now. Only love. Only happy tears. Only a good story book and a good boy who knows damn well how to kiss a girl till her

blood boils. It's a one piece puzzle.  
And who cares where that piece  
goes. It's none of my concerns.



"Can anyone tell us what prompted *Katniss* to volunteer in place of *Primrose*?"

Mr. Avery scans the class and stops his gaze at the back. "I think Blackburn can tell us."

A paper ball is tossed half way across the room, landing on Blake's head. He doesn't stir a bit.

"Blake." Avery calls out again.

Sherri rubs his arms, whispering, "Blake, wake up!"

"Not that way," Matty grabs the water bottle on the side of Blake's desk and Sherri cups her mouth, already laughing as her brother uncaps the bottle and holds it over his head.

"Rise and shine, Buddha!"

The class bursts into laughter when Matty turns the bottle over, pouring the water. Blake launches out of his chair, shaking the water out of his hair and shrieking until he realizes he's in class.

Sherri snorts. Avery crosses his arms.

"Thanks, Mathew."

"You!"

Matty laughs. Blake snatches the bottle away. "That's not funny."

The bell rings and Blake heads to the washroom. When he comes back out Matty and Sherri are waiting on him, still laughing. He can't help but smile.

"Avery's class finally got a bit more interesting today," says Sherri, sizing the difference with her finger and thumb.

"You must be bored to have read the *Hunger Games* five times over," says Blake, leading them to the cafeteria.

"The entire series," says Sherri.  
"Why'd you sleep in class?"

"He was DJing at Neon last night," says Matty.

"Plus, I lost my copy of *Hunger Games*."

"Download the audiobook," says Sherri. "Or listen to mine. I got it on a discount."

"Audiobooks are lame," says Matty, pushing the doors to the cafeteria open. "Ain't that right, Buddha!"

"You better stop calling me that," Blake scoops a plate from the counter as they line up in the queue.

"Then you better stop astral projecting yourself to Mars to see Myla."

"For the last time it's not Mars. It's different there."

"How different? Heavenly?"

"See for yourself," Blake reaches in his pocket and pulls out Matty's camera.

"No shit!" Matty scoops it up and taps it on.

"Hey! Vegetables?"

"Oh, pardon," he places the camera in his breast pocket and holds out his plate for his greens and packet of milk.

They get to their table where he can bring out the camera again. Sherri peers over her brother's shoulder as the screen comes on, displaying their lunch. He quickly taps into the previous photos file and his jaw drops.

"Dude!"

"What!" Blake raises his hand, chewing like it's no big deal, his fork entangled in his noodles.

"She's hot." Matty turns the camera over for Blake. It's Myla's selfie. Taken from her bedroom. Her hair, an auburn fire cascading down her shoulders and her lips, a broad smile. An ocean of glowing fish highlights the background, like a hundred gorgeous lights blurring in the water, the sensors too slow to transform their quick movements into a still picture.

"This is the kind of hair I call flames!"

"Hey!" Sherri jabs Matty in the side. "I do better than that! And hers aren't even red!"

"Don't think so redhead," Matty turns back to Blake. "You make out with this every night?"

"What's wrong?"

"Never thought... This is happening... like for real, dude? You two are officially an intergalactic couple?"

"I don't know. I think I like her. Then I think I'm playing along. It's complicated."

"Oh, I see..." Matty nods his head, but in a way that makes Sherri think he's being a jerk. "Anyway, gotta hang with Charlie. See ya after school."

He rises up with his plate and leaves.

Sherri turns to Blake, "I guess that leaves you and me—oh, you're almost done with your noodles."

Blake sucks the last bits, "I've got Sammi to feed. Ciao!" Blake rises too and Sherri quickly follows.

"Wait up. I'm coming with you."

"Okay."

They get outside behind the school. The asphalt shimmers under a layer of water and fog. Blake swings his backpack in front as they come down the steps and pulls out a bowl and a can of dog food.

When they're done preparing it and have it set on the ground, Blake makes a long whistle. In Sammi's language, lunch is served. Out of the bushes a border collie comes running out and launches itself at Blake. Sherri laughs, petting



Sammi's back as he gets down for lunch.

"Still do this every day?"

"Yeah," says Blake. "He practically follows me everywhere and since mom's still away I gotta take care of him here."

"That's pretty sweet."

"Thanks."

Sherri strokes her own arm, leaning on one leg and contemplating if she should ask... her instincts tell her she better. *I only want the best for you.*

"So you're playing along?"

"With what?"

"You know who I'm talking about."

"Oh... that."

"I have to admit, she's gorgeous but..." Blake beams down to stroke Sammi's hair.

"I hope you're not avoiding my juice-the-truth stare."

"Oh no. It's just your flames. They're too bright."

Sherri laughs and playfully pats her hair. She crouches beside Blake.

"Seriously, are you really into this girl?"

"Sherri, it's crazy. Sometimes I don't even know what I'm doing. Like... I just gave her one of my old *Scooby Doo* books."

"Are you into her?"

"I still don't know. She's great but... I just wish she was someone from..."

"Planet Earth? I've seen the photos. At a glance. It's really something else. It's Pandor, right?"

"Yeah. I think it's the photos that have bummed me all day."

"And the dreams? Exchanging stuff? Kissing her?"

Blake sighs. Sammi is almost done with his lunch. He gets up and Sherri follows his lead, placing her hands on both his shoulders. "Look at me and think about this: If the dreams suddenly stopped and Myla was gone, would you miss her?"

She lets her arms drop and backs away. "Think about it."

She heads back inside and Sammi runs out when the bell rings. Blake watches him leave. His eyes try to

visualize Myla in his place, running away from him. Perhaps for good. And she disappears into the fog. But he still knows she's there. She's very much there. And she's not going anywhere.

*If things happen for a reason  
then... why Myla?*

The particles dance in the light.  
They follow the rhythm of the song  
playing in my head. *Be My Soldier*,  
by *Kelly*.

I up my chin so the medicinal  
light catches my throat. My skin  
tingles. I relax in my starfish pose  
and make sure I don't accidentally  
shoot orbs out of my hands. Each  
morning I wake up more powerful  
but the Elders are worried.

Today I'm heading back to the Major Tower. And it's going to be a bad day.

### **Rhiannon wishes to Teleport.**

"Permit," I rush to my room and get dressed. When I step into my living room Rhiannon is waiting, dressed in a black tracksuit. Black means he's upset. I haven't been a good girl.

"Why did you do that?"

I walk around him into the kitchen like it's not a big deal. "I... was getting some fresh air."

"We did you a favor. Is this how you appreciate us?"

"Rhiannon, I'm sorry." I pick up my Metro from the cupboard and he comes quick to snatch it from my hands.

"Listen. Thea and I risked our reputations to give your watchers a distraction to earn you a visit from your dad. You don't want to end up living with Artemis, do you?"

"I don't want to be caged in here either. Give me my Metro back. I've got a bad day and I need my strength."

"And your brains." Rhiannon tosses the Metro cube back at me and heads in the living room. He's clearly upset. And breakfast doesn't taste all that good anymore. I guess it's how the Oracle days go.

In an hour I'm standing outside the Hexagon Chamber. Artemis has his arms crossed behind his back, glaring at me in brief glances.

Rhiannon is beside Cinder who is constantly studying the data on his Nanotop. Thea and Phoebe are also here and the extras in the background are white scientists whose job I really do not know. They're just here to prop up the equipment.

The path ahead of me is illuminated in a blue light.

"Proceed," says Cinder, focused as usual on the toy in his hands. Not the slightest sympathy for what I have to go through again and again. I don't expect any from Thea either,



she didn't look too happy when I walked out of the Vine with Rhiannon.

I take a deep breath and walk over the blue. The green lasers zap out and scan my eyes. Confirming my identity, the walls open up, revealing the large metallic cage and the Oracle inside. Glowing with a bright orange.

When I'm in, the Hexagon walls close behind me in a thud that makes me gasp.

It's just me and the Oracle. I close my eyes and rest my palm on the side of the floating sphere like I've done so many times and screamed each time after. My teeth grit and all I can think about is Blake and

the kiss and the story book I left  
under my pillow beside the iPod.

My palm is glued to the Oracle  
and it starts. I wait for it to hurt.

But it doesn't.

I think I was simply anticipating it. The data begins to flow into my subconscious but in a different manner. The millions of images thundering into my mind coalesce into one bright light.

And I'm back home. On my bed this morning. I've just woken up and I'm excited about the story book in my hands. I've learned to wake up early so I can enjoy what Blake gives me early on.

I flip to the first page and begin to read the new mystery. This one is about a man who changes into a werewolf every full moon. The neighborhood is terrorized with fear and the people move until the street is deserted.

*Velma* is smart to pick up clues, *Daphne* is easily scared when she sees a large shadow of a mouse and quickly jumps into *Fred's* arms. *Scooby Doo* is supposed to sniff the monster out but instead, leads the gang to a burger kitchen where he and *Shaggy* have a round.

As the story goes a little paper falls into my lap. I'm shocked to see it has Blake's face on it under the words: Driver's License.

What happens next flickers with images of war, ancient Pandor and hovercrafts, all crashing into my head. I try to bring back the light. The images speed into each other and it's all white again. This time I'm stuffing the Driver's License in the pocket of the pants I plan to wear today and I'm heading for my medicinal sunshine lesson. I remember what I plan to do with the Driver's License. But only in pieces. It's quite difficult to be conscious of my intentions in this state.

My morning on replay ends with me washed in light, standing a few feet away from the screen. I recall the next scene in which Rhiannon

arrives. But as I wait for the message to sound, the story takes a sudden twist.

**Stretaka wishes to Teleport.**

"What's happening?"

In an instant Myla's adrenaline levels have skyrocketed on the Nanotop. Cinder tilts it away but Rhiannon's already seen the data.

"Nothing I think is serious," says Cinder.

"Is that normal?"

"She's fine."

"Answer me. Is that normal?"

"No. It's not normal," Cinder ups his tone. "But tell me what is? She's

transitioning quick. Her records are changing every day."

"Stop the Oracle."

"You can't order me to do that!"

Artemis looms behind Rhiannon.

"What is the matter?"

Rhiannon snatches the Nanotop away from Cinder and shows it to the Elder. "Something is wrong with Myla. She's in trouble."

"Anxiety levels? That's all that bothers you?" Artemis mocks.

"She could be in danger!"

"She's safe," Phoebe appears besides Artemis.

"Perhaps Rhiannon has a point," says Thea. "Maybe we should check her out."



"That's simple," Cinder points them to the infrared screen overhead. Myla's red silhouette holds her palm to a white glowing Oracle, enveloped by a blue background—nothing out of the ordinary. "No sign of danger there."

"I don't trust you. I need to get in there," says Rhiannon.

"No one's letting you in."

Rhiannon pushes Cinder aside and steps onto the blue path. A group of scientists intervene. Artemis calls out but Rhiannon is adamantly pushing through the flock of lab coats trying to hold him back.

The green lasers strike his eyes.

"RHIANNON!"

He stops dead. Thea has her arms around him, pleading. "Don't... not a smart move. She still needs you."

"Something is happening."

"I know. But we can only wait for the Oracle to stop in its own time."

"She's on adrenaline for too long, Thea."

"Have faith. She'll be alright. Pull back now."

His gaze hovers up to the red figure on the infrared display. The green laser beams still on his eyes, waiting for one more step to vaporize him.

*She still needs you.*

**I repeat, Stretaka wishes to  
Teleport.**

The color disappears from my face. I am left staring back at the medicinal sunshine, emanating from the screen. Mouth wide and eyes searching for an answer.

"Restrict!"

The moment I manage to say the word a dark patch appears on the screen where rays of light used to be.

*No way!*

Another patch forms in the center. They spread and connect to each other like drops of water. Frozen on my feet, I watch as the light is eaten up into a shadowy reflection of myself.

Only this reflection is waving its hand when I don't. "Hi, Myla! Nice home!"

I scream. Loud. And bolt out the room. His voice follows right behind me.

"Why won't you let me in? I won't hurt."

I rush to my bedroom in my underwear. The orb lights bob in the air and the *Scooby Doo* storybook is peeping out from

under the pillow. For some  
unknown reason I rush to the bed  
and tuck it in safely, my heart  
galloping.

*He's here! He's here!*

A shadow looms across the room.  
It's not mine. I spin around and  
notice the ocean behind my glass  
wall is turning black.

The darkness plumes into it like  
an oil spill and the glowing  
Lunabees sink down, flashing their  
last blips of light before fading into  
the black.

"Get out!" I roar.

I leap off my bed and head to my  
living room to witness the same  
scene. The waters are turning into  
darkness. The light is disappearing.

The orb lights in the air flicker until  
there's nothing left.

But the dark.

The smothering dark.

It flows like water and blows like  
wind.

It's everywhere.

"I won't let you in!"

"Oh, Myla!" he replies, his voice  
circling around. "I don't need your  
permission to get in. I do as I  
desire."

With ragged breaths I turn  
around, watching where he might  
come through. All I see is my lonely  
living room, slowly losing light until  
there's nothing to see.

Pitch-black.

The orb lights crash to the floor and burst, startling me. Sparks leap onto the carpet and disappear.

"There's no running now," he sneers. Still circling. "You're in my cage."

"No!" I gasp in the dark.

"And you are mine."

"NO!"

Right there the glass walls burst inwards with a force I never anticipated.

From instinct I orb up. He comes crashing around me in waves. The darkness flows over my orb like oil. I'm not letting him through. The furniture gets flicked off the floor like feathers.

I'm holding my ground.

"Smart move."

"I've been trained! I'm ready to fight you."

"Really?" The darkness collects ahead of me, stirring up. Turning from oil to smoke. "How about this!"

He comes smashing toward me. The impact almost knocks me off balance as he crashes around my orb like a hurricane of rage. I stand strong. He diverges and recollects.

"I'm stronger than you think!"

The voice travels around again but I keep to my ground. "I know exactly how strong you are. We have the same elements. The same powers."



I scream out, "We're nothing alike!"

He shouts as he comes back, charging again. The force knocks me down to my knees. My arms shake as I fight to hold my only protection.

"I will devour you! You can't escape me. There is no path where you don't end up in my hands. I am your future, Myla!"

Another blow engulfs me and I can feel my orb is about to cave in. When he pulls back I get back on two. He flows across the floor, away from me like a stream.

I turn on my heels, waiting for the next attack. He swings back again in

a pillar of darkness. Too close and too fast.

*No!*

I look away, keeping my arms outstretched as the gigantic pillar crashes with my orb. I'm flying backwards, into nothing.

"You're weak!"

*I'm not!*

My orb is gone and I'm spinning. I feel shards of glass around me, slashing against my arms.

*I've gotta orb, fast!*

He flanks me with a hurricane and I'm tossed the other way, out of control like an object in space. Mustering all my strength, I orb up and it's enough to give me some gravity and slow down. The

blackness swirls back into place,  
into its circles.

"Get out!"

"Me?" he sneers. "The only person  
who is getting out is you!"

I feel it coming and I focus my orb  
into two balls, hovering about my  
hands. A strike—a rocket of smoke  
—accelerates for me and I blast it  
away with a left hook. Our energies  
swallow each other.

"I will destroy you!"

He lunges again and I block with  
my right orb, then quickly orb  
around my left fist again,  
anticipating the next attack.

"I will eat you up!"

He comes and I fight back. My orb exploding into his black, pocketing his fires away.

"I will consume you!"

I thrust both arms up and stop another cloudy pillar hammering over my head, breaking it into ash. He rains around me. But his voice is omnipresent. Like I'm in his mind and this is his world.

"Come here, Myla. Let me tear you apart!"

"You won't!" I grit my teeth, thrusting my orb upwards one more time and we clash head on. He buries me under darkness and I'm almost on my knees again.

*Don't give in, Myla! Don't give in!*

"Your flesh and blood will be mine. You will become me!"

"Over my dead body!"

He pulls back and I have a breather. My momentum almost trips me forward.

"You have no idea who I am. And what I'm capable of. So let me tell you..."

"Tell this!" I do a full body orb and he comes hard from above. The blackness swallowing me completely. It's pitch-black and I'm sweating to save myself.

"You're a monster. I'm a Lebra. I'll defeat you!" I gasp, beads of sweat floating off my face. "I'll beat the crap out of you!"

"I. Am. Coming. There is no escape."

"We're done here!" In all my might I thrust upwards into the dark. My orb bursts into the nothingness. I drift in the void, without protection. Without sense. Out of breath and without strength... a strobe of light punctures the darkness, as if coming from the ceiling. Two more appear overhead.

The Lunabees.

They rise back and light up the room, swimming in the air. They come so close I can touch them. And they don't swim away. They're here to help me.

And they're singing a song. One I  
know...

*So won't you come around me  
I miss the way  
You reach up my head  
And play with my hair  
Baby, won't you come  
And play with my hair  
You know how I love it  
When you touch me right there  
Baby, I love it when you play  
with my hair*

Stretaka flows away, like a pattern  
of smoke sliding off the damaged  
walls and broken floor as they  
reappear. To my shock, I can see the  
iPod playing, the screen shining

beneath the ripped pages of *Scooby Doo's Mystery*. Redeeming me from this nightmare.

I don't know if it's the music or the Lunabees or my strength that helped me defeat Stretaka. All I know is that I want the boy I love to be safe. I can't let Blake be a part of this. I've got to protect him in every possible way.

The room fills with multicolored Lunabees until it all becomes bright. The water and the air transcend into each other's forms, letting me breath while the fish easily swim, watching over me like guardians. The darkness is no more. He is gone.



Gasping, I fall on my back, the  
Oracle steaming orange and floating  
above me. My chest heaves and I  
can barely see the ceiling anymore.  
I hear the hissing sound of the  
opening walls and Rhiannon's face  
appears. But my voice is lost.  
And I'm gone too.

"She's been acting differently,"  
says Cinder.

"I expected that. The recent events have been sour pills," says Artemis, his gaze fixed on Myla, soundly asleep in the hospital bed of the Tower. Her Kronite still covers her body.

"It's not only her behavior. Her sleeping patterns have changed. The Hypnotic tones don't seem to work as they should on her nerves. Her perception of Capricorn's laws

are imbalanced. All in just a few days."

"Have you forgotten that just a few days ago Myla's world changed with the second Shielding and a new threat. The enemy is finally here. Why wouldn't her sleeping patterns change, Cinder? Can you give me a reason why she should act normal? Why the calming Hypnotic tones should function the same way they did when there was no threat on her existence? She lives in a world with much more pressure than our average citizen."

Cinder sighs, slightly abashed and turns his gaze away from Artemis, focusing instead on Myla's breaths and then on the Nanotop in his

hands. The screen illuminates his face in the dimly blue room.

"Perhaps you should recheck your data, Cinder. I've witnessed the entire life of our former Lebra. I know what to expect. There's nothing wrong with the girl on this bed. The only thing that's wrong in this room is you."

"Sorry?" Cinder looks up.

"Stop chasing a destiny that does not belong to you."

"I don't know what you mean, my Lord."

"You've always wanted to be Lebra. But it was Myla who was chosen. Your aura failed the test. I chose you to study her because I knew you were obsessed with

everything she was. Everything you weren't."

Cinder grits his teeth.

"You've always wanted to be the one to defeat Stretaka. I'm sorry, you're not Pandor's hero. You're a boy with a Nanotop whose job is to watch over the real savior."

Cinder turns to Myla and Artemis gives him a moment to let the truth seep in. He places his hand on his shoulder. "It's not your destiny."

He's about to walk away when Cinder calls back, "Give her one more Amnesia Trial."

"Why?"

"I need to probe inside her mind. See why she's acting this way."

"Or the two of you could finally be honest with each other and have a conversation about it."

"I can't risk her lying to me. Something is wrong and I know it."

"They said the same thing when she had her first period. Bullshit," Rhiannon walks into the room.

"How's she doing?"

"Still asleep. She's fine now," Artemis turns to Cinder. "I agree she needs another Trial. She needs to fight better. What you do with your data is between you and your toys."

"She isn't gonna like that," Rhiannon sits on her bed as Artemis leaves the room. He strokes her hair.

"And what in the world does Myla like?"

Rhiannon smiles, "Me."

"Because you're naive. Like her."

Rhiannon raises a hand, "Woah, stop right there. I know I'm naive. I'm very naive. But don't you ever call Myla naive. She's the one dealing with the real truth here. Artemis is right. She's everything that you're not. Don't force it."

"That's not true!" Cinder blares, fuming in Rhiannon's face. "I'm a hero. I know I am!"

"Woah, easy there."

Cinder's face bulges with popping veins. His breaths become ragged.

"Don't take it personal," says Rhiannon, "No one has any idea how to fight this enemy."

Cinder pulls back, sliding his teeth at him. "Don't be too sure about that."

He spins around and heels out.

Rhiannon smirks.

*So much for underdogs!*



When I wake up Rhiannon has his head in his hands. He hears me stir and takes a glance, smiling.

"There you are."

I feel warmed up to see him again. I'd rather be in a comma than wake up to Cinder or Artemis.

"What happened? Why am I in the hospital?"

"The Oracle was rough on you today. Did you see anything you remember?"

I nod my head, "Not a thing."

I sit up and notice the Kronite seeping off my shoulders and back into my belt. "I don't know what happened but it doesn't look pretty."

"You were scared," says Rhiannon. "What could have scared you?"

"Well... I know I don't easily succumb to fear unless I'm having a nightmare. I don't know what else I could have been afraid of."

Deep inside my heart I know the only thing that makes my heart skip a beat is Blake's safety. He may be light-years away but distance is nothing to Stretaka.

"You're having your next Amnesia Trial tomorrow."

"So soon?"

"Cinder wants to pick your brain and see what's wrong. I overheard him and Artemis talking about it."

"Why?"

"You've been acting differently. And I can't deny it. Perhaps, if there's anything you'd like me to know... I could be of some help."

I know he means well. And he's the person I trust the most after my dad. But how can I possibly tell him how badly I've fallen in love with a boy from Earth? How can I tell him what I can do with my dreams? Above all, I need to protect this love. Even from the people I love the most and hate to lie to.

Sometimes I wish there was someone I could talk to and share my crazy experiences with. Someone like Xena. Not my spore, the real Xena. Just another girlfriend to talk girl stuff to.

"Everything is okay," I lie, "Except that I could be turned into Stretaka anytime soon if I don't have the skills to fight him."

"You know what?" Rhiannon crosses his arms. "I think you can take him."

I chuckle. "You're naive."

"Wow, Cinder told me the same thing earlier," he leans in, "It's not impossible."

"We don't even know how to fight Stretaka. Or what his weak side is."

Where do you begin to attack a cloud of consciousness?"

Rhiannon takes my hand, sitting beside me. "We're Shielded. Don't you forget that. There's no way he can get in. No way at all. You probably won't even have to live to fight him at all. We could leave that mess to the next Lebra. Or the one after him."

"Or her," I add.

"Yeah. Female Lebras are more interesting to be around." He pats my head and messes my hair up. I'm smiling under his affection.

"Thanks, Rhiannon. I gotta go now."

I slide off the bed.

"Want me to escort you home?"

"No thanks. I got this," I saunter out the hospital and round the corner, quickly making my way to the Vine. I take a deep breath and sink my hand in my pocket.

It's still there.

*That was close!*

As soon as I get in the elevator I think about my next destination: the Hub. It's technically the biggest database in the Universe. During a time when Pandor was obsessed about monitoring other planets for security purposes, they built the Hub to store as much information about every individual in over ten planets. How do they do this? They hack into networks in different planets and bring home the data.

I pull the card out of my pocket for another look. It's crazy to bring Blake's Driver's License in the Tower but it's something I am willing to risk. Thank goodness my Kronite didn't seep out after my Oracle session.

I can't imagine what would happen if the doctors caught it. My entire life (and love life) would be screwed.

The elevator stops and my door slides down. An extensive computer lab materializes in front of me. A few personnel are hunched over their floating Nanotops. Others standing next to the much larger and high tech, Macrotops, hanging

from the ceiling or propped against the walls.

I stroll in. Completely out of uniform. There are two ways I can do this.

One: be nice to a man on a Nanotop and ask him for access to the Hub's files. The downside to that is they will know that I came looking for information of a boy who lives on Earth and Cinder and the Elders will be all over me.

Bad idea.

Two: I can befriend someone in the maintenance crew who has direct access into the physical Hub where I can manually get the information I need. No drawbacks.



Except, I need a stupid chum who can keep a secret.

*Time to charm up!*

I curve around the flying tablet-computers, noticing how everyone is Cinder-focused—yes, he has become the standard unit of focus for my interpretation. These guys really love their toys. I head to the back of the room and out the door, into a long corridor.

Workers in yellow body suits cruise along and I follow one back to the changing room, ignoring the sidelong glances everyone else keeps giving me.

The changing room is a cubicle with built in closets and two shower rooms. The worker in front of me

takes off her helmet and her jet-black hair falls on her shoulders.

I speak up. "Hi! I need some help."

She turns around and my heart stops cold.

"I never thought I'd see you so soon," she grins.

I am breathless as I stare at her. When I do find my voice, her name leaps from lips.

"Xena!"

"I thought you would have forgotten my name by now."

We crash into a hug. Swinging side to side and holding each other tight. I can barely believe it's her.

"You've got to be kidding me," I say.

She pulls out, "Then take another look!"

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm on an internship for data management bla bla bla, boring stuff. Cool thing is, I get to work at

the Major Tower every day. And I finally get to see you!"

"That's awesome!"

"And what are you doing sneaking around here?"

"I need to get inside the Hub—physically. But I don't have a costume."

"Oh," Xena spins for the closet behind her and pulls out an identical body suit along with its helmet. "You do now!"

In ten minutes I'm all dressed up and we're on our way to the Hub's door. A round wall of steel, guarded by clone soldiers. I cringe under my helmet at the sight of them.

"Stay behind me," says Xena, taking the lead. She flips the shield

on her helmet and two green lasers zap out for an eye scan. It takes a bit longer than I expect but the lasers retreat and the Hub door peels apart.

The Hub is a stem with silver glowing walls. Full of tiny cells in random sizes. Each carry trillions of bits of information.

Xena flips her helmet back on and waves at me to follow her lead.

**Interns. You are about to enter the physical Hub, presumably the largest database ever created. Your conditions are set at the default zero gravity, zero degrees and...**

The voice overhead rambles on about the specifics and I return a worried look at Xena.

"Is this safe for a first timer?"

"Relax," she says, "Zero-G is fun — actually it's microgravity. Now on three."

She holds one red bar that stands inside the open door and I grab the one on the other side.

"Two... Three!"

She pushes herself off the bar and flies into the Hub. I watch and learn and launch myself after her, flying up.

"You didn't count one."

"Who made that a rule?" Xena grins. Even through the visor on her

helmet I can see her grand look of mischief. "Come on now. Who's this person you're looking for?"

I float up effortlessly behind Xena, marveling at the glossy data cells, reflecting light off each other.

"Someone from Earth."

The environment feels as ethereal as it looks. There are no shadows. It's like floating in a silvery grey version of space

"And why are we looking for his data?"

The fact that we're communicating via mics and earpieces inside our helmets raises a red flag for me. *What if we're being monitored?*

"Hey, Xena?"

"What?"

"Is someone else listening in?"

"No. But the conversation will be saved in a secret box inside the suit."

I wave my hands, trying to get up faster before realizing it's to no avail. No air here.

"Is there a way we can delete it?"

This time Xena looks down at me. Our eyes connect.

"What's going on, Myla?"

"I can't tell anyone about this."

Xena has now stopped with hands on the silvery wall, extending to infinity above and below. I float up and stop beside her.

"There's an incinerator. I can say I mistook it for the laundry chute."



"Great."

I breathe out.

Xena clutches my arm. "What's happening? You can't keep secrets, you know?"

"I know. I'm Lebra."

"I mean from me," she grins. "I want to know."

My instincts say I can trust her. Maybe I should go for it. After all, she's helping me out big time. I just hope this isn't a mistake.

"Okay. But it's a crazy story."

"I love crazy stories."

Right there I break my most holy commandment. I tell her about my dreams. About Blake and his iPod. The music. The videos. The stories and the Driver's License. She

swallows every bit of it with raised brows and chuckles.

When I'm done she's shaking her head, about to laugh and cry all at once.

"And now I have Stretaka to worry about, more intense trainings and —"

"You're in love."

I grit my teeth and say yes like a helpless little girl.

"Please don't tell anyone."

"Relax, I won't. So this Blake... he's okay?"

"He loves me."

Xena nods her head as if questioning the truth about that.

"From what I know about your life, this is definitely your first love."

"Yes."

"Myla... who knows what this guy does when he's not asleep. He's on another planet. Far away. This is more than just a long distance relationship. This is a very, very, very, long distance relationship."

"At least we see each other every night. Some people with loved ones in Arius don't get to see them for blue moons."

Xena sighs. "Sorry. It wasn't fair. The Elders made us move after you were chosen. They said it was best we separated. Anyway, this is a weird place to have this conversation. I'm just trying to look out for you. Love hurts. I know. It's hurt me. Like over and over again."

"Blake is great."

Xena gives me a hard look before her lips part, "Yup. You're in love. Let's get his data so we can ditch this place. I apparently don't like long exposures to Zero-G. Makes me sick."

I pull out the card and hand it to her. She swipes it around in front of the glossy cells, murmuring my boyfriend's name. They begin to shrink and then expand, curving in and out.

"Searching," says Xena.

Soon, the cells begin to shine around a spot and one particular cell is born out of the gloss, squeezing itself in between the others. It's bigger than the ones

around it and could easily fit in my palm.

"Take it."

I peel it out and hold it between my thumb and my finger. It's as small as a chip, thin as paper.

"Woah!"

The Hub works organically. These data cells are organic. In fact, they are actually composed of millions of life-size cells. They store memories. When a new data cell is born it means some selected information is duplicated or the Hub needs more memory space, which hasn't happened yet.

"Thanks, Xena."

"Not a problem. It's great to see you again." She gives me another

hug. "You'll need a Data-cell  
reading pathware to retrieve the  
data. Have a spore?"

My lips curve, "I think I do."

The bin is full of paper balls.  
Rolled up and tossed in after every  
failed attempt to draw the face in  
the photo propped on the desk.  
Homework got boring before Blake  
resorted to recreating Myla's face  
on paper with a deep HB pencil.

It didn't go well so games are what  
now comfort him from the thoughts  
that haunt. The questions that  
tirelessly probe back at him every  
time he let's go of focus and settles  
in the present. Like dust, settling

through the air. It can be magic. Or it can be haunted.

Leaning back in his chair with feet propped on the desk, he grits his teeth as his fingers dance on the screen.

"Come on, come on!" he mutters at the little jet, dashing through the clouds on his iPhone. He tilts the phone to peel right, avoiding shots from some kid in Hong Kong while punctuating the wind with bullets. The target is an Algerian kid named *Blackhorse189* and he's been after him for days. He swerves again and his shots echo away into oblivion.

*Man, this boy is good!*

Blake flies the jet, bringing down a couple of players before his two



arch enemies gang up behind him and send him crashing into the waters.

"Shit!"

He sets the iPhone down. The dust has settled but the thoughts don't come back. Blake's eyes fall on Myla's photo, printed and smiling back at him. His phone rings.

He beams over the caller ID:  
Unknown Number.

*Mom must be calling from a pay-phone again.*

He picks up his phone and heads out to the balcony.

"Hello?"

The large tree outside hangs over and Blake absentmindedly picks at the leaves as he leans on the

railings. His fingers freeze when his caller says his name. First, she isn't sure it's him but as the silence stretches she calls his name again and Blake begins to laugh back at how ridiculous reality can be.

"Myla?"

"I'm here, baby!"

"Listen, Sherri. If this is some prank call to make me—"

"It's not Sherri. It's Myla. It's really me. You left your Driver's License at my place by mistake. Technically it was in the book you gave me so that winded up in my room."

*I wondered where I'd placed that!*

"... Blake?"

"How...?"

"I got your contact from our Hub. It's a large database. I'm calling you from something called a spore. I don't know if you have it there. How are you listening in?"

"On my phone. My iPhone actually. It's like an iPod that can make calls."

"Oh! I can picture that!"

"Dammit, Myla! Are you really calling me?"

"I almost can't believe it either! I just tried and the call got through. Did you like the photos I sent you?"

"I-I loved them. Matty can't believe how beautiful you are. I've been telling him. And Pandor... I think it's the most beautiful place

I've seen. The houses floating on the ocean..."

"I wanted a house on the ocean too! But the Elders prefer to hide me underwater. That's why my picture has fish in the background. What's earth like?"

"Very much like Pandor. But the infrastructure is different. It's not as green as your cities are."

"I won't lie. I learned about Earth when I was in Engagement and we saw these moving holograms with pictures and stuff."

"How old were you then?"

"About two blue moons old. When I was three I was chosen to become Lebra. And everything changed."

"How long is a blue moon?"

"Haha, a long, long time. I'm six now. How old are you?"

"Seventeen years. How sure can I be that I'm not dating an old lady?"

"Haha! You've seen me, Blake. I don't think six blue moons and seventeen years are that far apart... I hope," she laughs. "By the way, I met this friend of mine I hadn't seen for eons. Her name is Xena. And I told her about you. I hope that's okay."

"Fine by me. I'm just worried about you. You freak me out when you talk about your life and the things you have to do."

"And you warm me up when you kiss me and teach me how to free

myself from concern by reading  
*Scooby Doo.*"

Blake smirks. "I want to kiss you  
now."

"Babe, I can't wait."

"The wait will be worth the  
reward."

"It better be. I'm not very patient."

"Come see me."

"You want me to sleep now?"

"Come to Earth. All the Happy  
Ever After's happen on Earth."

Myla laughs, "As far as the stories  
tell."

"So you'll come?"

"You know it's not easy, Blake."

"Hey, hey, don't back away on me  
now. I love you and I want you here.  
Long distance has its limits."

"I know. The long distance is driving me crazy. But I think it's romantic. And it's safe. For you it's safe. No one can hurt you. No one can take you away from me."

"I know. You don't want me to end up like," Blake sighs, this could be a red button. "Your family."

"You won't. I'll protect you."

"By not coming to see me for real?"

"Please don't take it like that."

"I know it's tough. But it's not impossible," Blake turns his eyes over the trees. To the sky, remembering a quote that his mother used to say from one of her favorite authors, *what was that book he wrote anyway . . . The*

*Alchemist?* "My mom used to say: It will work if you forget all the reasons why it won't."

He can feel her smile.

"That's sweet."

"So will you just forget about the how and just promise me that you'll come see me on Earth. Because we love each other and there's no better reason why we can't make this love happen."

"Well, Blake, love. I promise you with all my heart that I will come see you. This year. This blue moon. This whatever measure of time we may call. I don't care how it will happen. I'm not concerned," she pauses, "But I know I'll come to see you and wrap my arms around you."



We'll make this love happen, baby. I promise."

"And we let the words go."

"We let them go do the job for us."

"We don't have to worry about a thing."

"Because worry won't make us birds fly. And while we wait we still have the dreams."

"Our secret place."

"Our utopia."

"Our Eden."

"What's that?"

"A garden where the first two people ever created lived in... until they made a mistake and then they had to leave."

"Aw, sad story. Will they go back to Eden?"

"I don't know. But there's Paradise. You know, after this life."

"Oh! We believe in the stars. That's where all good people go to when their lives on their planets are over."

"What's in the stars?"

"I have no idea. But there's everyone you've ever loved and all of your family and friends. There's lots of joy. In fact, there's a little Verse about it."

"Tell me."

"Bodies in heaven, enveloped by the company of stars. That all I can remember."

"It sounds cool."

"I know... How do you feel?"

"What?"

"How do you feel now? I want to know."

"Why?"

"Just tell me."

"Okay... I want to see you. And I'm on tiptoes because I can't wait to see where this leads us. But there are no shortcuts. So I remain on tiptoes. How do you feel?"

"Gosh! I can't compete with that!"

"Just say what's inside."

"Okay. I feel like... I can't wait to see what happens next for us. I can't wait to see my path to you light up. And I can't wait to take the next step to get us closer. I'm nervous and excited and I'm so happy at the same time."

"Where are you right now?"

"I'm home. Lying on my bed,  
imagining your face in my mind. I  
have my spore beside me. Okay now  
I'm rolling over."

"Haha!"

"I have butterflies in my  
stomach."

"I'm sorry I'm making you sick."

"You're bad for me. No wonder  
they never wanted me to date you."

"I guess I'm making you a bad  
girl."

"Yeah, like that song: *Good girl  
gone bad!*"

"How about *Out of Control*? You  
like it?"

"Yeah. But I think I've gained  
*some* control. I'm not completely

helpless. Except for when we're making out."

"What are ya talking about? You're an amazing kisser."

"Like the song *Good Kisser* by *Usher*? Gosh, there's a song for everything!"

"That's the beauty of music. It's everything in the universe, transformed into their audio versions."

"And stored in little devices called iPods. I wonder what song fits this moment?"

"There's a song called *Tiptoes*."

"I think I saw two."

"One by *Imagine Dragons*. And there's another one by *Miss*

*Reacher. Reacher's* version is awesome."

"How about I play *Play With My Hair*?"

"You want me to play with your hair again?"

"Yes. That's what I feel. Let me play it right now."

There's a little movement and Myla is back with the sound of tides crashing on the beach as the song begins. The stars drop and Holly starts to sing.

Blake holds his phone up, switching to speaker mode and watching the sky turn darker as the song plays through. He imagines Myla and her body, stretched on her

bed. Under the tones of the chorus he can hear her breathe.

"Love you. Thanks for calling. Did you risk your butt to get to the Hub?"

"Yeah. And it was worth it. You're all I got, Blake. I'll risk anything for you... anything."

I lie down to the sound of electronic pianos. They feel like strawberries falling on my back. They'd make a great massage. You're probably wondering what that feels like. Don't feel upset if you can't. I'm beginning to understand that music can be abstract and complex.

It's not very easy to transform music back into the tangible things they represent in the universe.



Inspiration doesn't leave many clues. But it can surprise.

My buds are well in my ears and I'm smiling to *SheraPova's* song, *Let me love you*. It starts with the electric pianos and then the trumpets stream in. It has some old sounds in it. Like the equipment they used was still not as modified as they are in songs by *Fall Out Cities*, *Coldplay* or *The Bullfighters*. And oh, it starts with a man's voice. On the artist photo he's got an Afro and his skin tone is exactly like mine. Light-skinned. Like cashew nuts.

*How do I look at you without losing my mind?*

*How do I sleep when you're not in  
my arms?*

*How do I dance without you by  
my side?*

The trumpets begin to take over  
and zigzag in the air, flying out like  
caged birds before the enthusiasm  
falls and the strawberries return to  
hit my back... Softly. Electronically.  
Gently. Gracefully. Patiently.

Wisely. Accurately. Artistically. Are  
there any better ways to talk about  
the piano? I don't know. I've done  
my best to find the physical  
counterpart for sounds but keep  
coming up with abstract things.  
Like feelings and concepts. Maybe

the Universe is made of abstract things too.

*How do I look at you without shaking my legs?*

*How do I hold you without sweating my hands?*

*How do I kiss your lips without bursting into flames?*

This song means so much to me. A woman took over this verse and she's had me thinking about my boy and all about the music and my promise. I hope there's a song about coming to Earth for the first time. I don't know how it's gonna happen. Luckily, he doesn't expect me to. So I don't have to care. I'm sure there's

a song about being concern free.  
Yup, that's *Bullfighters* style.

*You got me on fire  
I'm burning inside  
My dear, my dear, my dear  
Let me love you, it will feel just  
right.*

I want this to be the song I fall  
asleep to. And so far it's working.  
The song is on repeat so I'm hoping  
when I come along the lines of *I've  
fallen in love completely in my  
sleep*, I'll see his face again in our  
secret place. Where I can grab him  
and love him and keep him. For a  
while.

Dad once said that moments last forever even long after we've lived them through. And I know we've created some infinite moments of our own already, which puts a smile on my face as I close my eyes and dream.

I dream about my boy and our call. And about my favorite songs and Rhiannon and Thea. About meeting my dad and Mylo, even though I don't know what he looks like.

Oddly though, I find myself on my bed in the morning. *SheraPova's* song is still playing. I jerk out the ear buds and look around with utter shock. My heartbeats accelerate.

Something is wrong.

*I didn't meet Blake!*

The walk to the Track Station is silent. Rhiannon knows I don't like the idea. But asking for sympathy is childish. And I'm not going to receive any in a place this dim, guarded by clone soldiers on either side.

My Kronite is up all the way to my collarbone.

Rhiannon must know I'm frustrated. But he doesn't attempt to talk to me about Cinder's intentions. I know it's not his fault.

I just wish he could have argued about it. Artemis doesn't think twice about what he decides when it comes to me. But I guess another shot of Amnesia won't hurt.

We get into the egg-shaped car and the seat-belts automatically embrace me to my seat. The car begins to accelerate and a few working lights in the tunnel's ceiling flash on.

"Is it going to be difficult?"

"No," says Rhiannon.

"What am I going to do?"

"You know it won't help to tell. You'll only forget," he reaches into the little compartment box between our seats and pulls out a syringe.

"Here, be a good deer."



I lay my head in his hands and brace myself as he plunges the green fluid into my neck.

"There."

I position myself back against my seat. Now I will forget almost everything I am.

"I know it sucks. But it's only for an hour."

I chuckle, "Rhiannon, everything sucks."

The green fluid has its side effects: drowsiness.

The way ahead is pitch black and it makes it easier for my eyes to get bored. I calmly relax and let go of my senses. Deeper and deeper I go.

The stars drift across the red/blue sky, dressed in cotton clouds. I walk through the woods, following the sound of a creek and stop under a large rock, jutting above my head. Water pours over the rock and falls down like a miniature waterfall. I sit on a stone slab and pull my legs in, watching the water pour and listening to nature's music: trickling, splashing waters, chirping birds and croaking frogs.

I could stay here forever. Every breath I take fills me up with life. Sizzling life. All of nature is growing, always becoming. Always moving and expanding, reaching for more. The landscape is so

picturesque, I wish I had it hung in my bedroom.

Suddenly, a hand shields my view. I reach up to pull it away but it won't budge.

"Blake!"

He laughs, letting go. "That was easy."

I smile as he sits beside me on the slab, "Who else comes here?"

"Who knows. You could be cheating on me behind my back! Is that why we didn't see each other last night?"

"Haha, no idiot. I'm not cheating. And I don't know why we didn't meet. I got scared when I woke up."

"Wasn't the usual."

"Yeah."

"Maybe our utopia doesn't come every night."

I sigh, "Now that's frightening. At least you're here now."

"I slept in class again. They'll wake me up anytime."

"Oh. And I'm on my way for another dumb Amnesia Trial. I'm supposed to wake up forgetting who I am and fight in some simulated adventure."

"Sounds cool."

"I don't want to forget about you too, Blake. And Cinder, my human watchdog, wants to probe into my mind."

"Hack in?"

"Sort of. I don't want him to see anything to do with you in my head."

"Can he?"

"I don't know exactly what he sees. But there are ways to study my brain activity. And because I spend 50% of my thoughts on you, I'm a bit scared."

Blake wraps his arm over my shoulder. "It's okay. I don't think he can see all this," he gestures to the world in front of us.

"I hope not," I say. "I guess I should free myself from concern."

"You should."

I smile, "I just wish I was normal."

"Hey, if you were normal I wouldn't have the hots for you."

He makes me laugh again and it feels so right in his arms. In a place like this. I nudge him in the side. "I mean I want to live a life less complicated. You know the song, *Sticky Behavior*?"

"course I do."

"I love it! You know some songs speak to you, others speak for you. That song does both for me."

"Would you like me to sing it for you, right now?"

My eyes light up a thousand watts more. "I would love that!"

"Sit on my lap. I'm gonna serenade to you."

I giggle. "Okay." His legs hang over the slab and I sit on his laps. He holds me so I don't fall off with

the water, arching a few inches from my head. A few drops hit me but I don't mind. He's singing to me and holding me and it's all I need.

*You dressing like her  
She dressing like me  
I'm walking to the shop  
To buy the same things  
I wanna go to church in a  
swimsuit  
Who gives a shit about what we  
do?*

And I jump in with the chorus,  
singing into his cheek because that's  
how our faces are positioned.

*Woah! Woah!*

*Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah*

*Woah! Woah!*

*Ah-ah-ah-oh!*

I'm swaying like the way *Holly Mae* does in the video when she sings that part, moving her hips as she saunters to the church building. Where everyone starts staring and pointing at her because she's in a blue swimsuit and they are all dressed to the nines. But she's being *Holly* and I love that. She makes me wanna be me.

We don't have much time and he senses my impatience. He turns my face and brushes his lips over mine. Softly. And exquisitely. Squeezing



my waist and moving his hands up my back.

His lips are like an electronic piano. They're wise and accurate. Artistic. Exact. Patient and graceful.

I love it when he lingers to taste the film on my lips before launching into me again, full and deep. I love how we easily fall into rhythm. And how I get better at responding to his kisses with each day.

It doesn't last for as long as I want. He begins to slip away. And he knows it. He's holding onto me harder and I'm all over him but there's no escape.

"You're waking up, Blake," I whisper.

"Not now."

But he goes, fading into a translucent hologram. His lips are no longer tangible. And when he's gone, it's like the whole world and the whole dream is gone.

And I have no memory of what happened. Of who I am or where I was.

The ground beneath me is hard as I lie face down. I push myself up to meet with the piercing sunlight. The translucent dome magnifies the light and the entire sky appears as a bright lamp, caging me in this foreign world.

With one hand blocking the sun, I stand up.

Crowds of people walk right by me  
as if I'm invisible. *They must be  
programmed!*

I sweep a look around. My locality  
is a concrete path filled with  
sculptures of past Lebras, lining  
towards me in order. When I don't  
see any sculptures behind me, I  
know I am positioned to be the last  
one.

A green park flanks the stone path  
to the left, bearing more statues,  
and on the opposite side towering  
buildings gleam in the monstrous  
light from the sky. The very sight of  
the narrow turrets, tailoring the  
skyline, engulfed by sunshine  
makes my eyes well up.

Through the tears I catch a glimpse of a silhouette, resembling a gorilla. As I rub my eyes, it all comes to focus: standing on a gigantic statue of Artemis is a robot, loaded with ammunition all the way and wired up for battle.

There's a sharp buzz and the people around me start to run away from the robot as he pounds his chest. A dog flashes in my mind doing the same thing. And a name that starts with *Scooby*. But it's only a flash of *déjà vu*. It won't come back.

Instinct tells me I have bigger problems to deal with. The robot beams at me and a gun propped on its shoulder aims downwards. A red

target-circle ascends up my feet and dances on my crown.

The Kronite wraps into my clothes, taking me by surprise. *I think I've done this before. But when?* Three things come to mind, repeating themselves on my lips:

**1. I have temporary selective amnesia. Focus on the subjects present now.**

**2. I instinctively already know my powers. Use them for the urgent cause.**

**3. Meet Rhiannon after completing the mission. My memory will then be restored.**



The translucent walls appear space grey from the outside. Inside the room they double as screens, displaying multiple 3D videos of Myla's previous training sessions. Cinder stares through the glass, ignoring the soundless videos, watching the clouds of dust ignite the stone path far ahead as she thrusts orbs at the robot.

The watch room facility imitates the shape of the dome and rests within the miniature city. It's close

enough to the Artemis statue that Cinder doesn't need the screen displays to see Myla fight.

*I can see her with my own two eyes... what am I missing?*

Fountains of dust spurt into the air, punctuated by the robot's red lasers, chasing Myla as she dives behind a staircase. She cowers her head. The lasers ricochet off the railings while the clones run frantically around the scene.

The robot flies above and she zigzags through the statue park of past Lebras.

*What is she really thinking? If I knew!*



The door behind flings open. Two clone soldiers usher in a girl in a yellow body suit.

"Here she is. As you asked," says one of the soldiers.

"Thank you, boys," says Cinder, still gazing out at the action. "Put her in the chair."

"I'd rather stand, thanks," she snaps.

"Sir?"

Cinder raises his hand, "It's okay. Let her stand."

He turns around and Xena is glaring at him, her arms caught between the soldiers. "Let her go."

"You didn't have to bring me in like this!" says Xena, "I'm not a criminal."

"It wouldn't be this way if you didn't try to run."

"I wasn't running. I was—"

"Trying to warn Myla before she had her Trial?"

"Warn her? What do I know about today's trial?"

Cinder smirks, "It's not about the trial. It's about her."

Xena breathes in deep pockets of air but doesn't faze out. She keeps her gaze steady. "What's the real reason why I'm here?"

"I need you."

"What?"

"Must I repeat myself?"

Xena cocks her head, "Why do you need me?"

Cinder sighs, "Look around this room, Xena. It's one giant puzzle." He begins to pace around. Gesturing at the walls where Myla falls through the sky, failing to save Artemis. Where she conquers a powerful laser beam and draws the others into her palm. Xena's gaze follows Cinder to the snapshots and video archives on display. Her unusual session with the Oracle and her quick orb reflexes.

Through the claustrophobic glass walls she looks outside into the real action. Her best friend is up in the air, charging at the robot as far as her orb can take her.

When Cinder grabs her attention again she's forced to see what

happens next from her peripheral: a red flash accompanied by a stone head that rolls off the statue's shoulders in a cloud of dust. When it shatters on the ground there is no sound.

The walls are soundproof.

"... one giant puzzle," Cinder turns back to Xena. "And I need you to solve it for me."

"You're outta your mind! I don't even know what you want."

"Myla has been behaving different. Or worse, thinking different. And she's become more stronger in a few days. More confident. And daring."

"I have nothing to do with that."

"I think the same. You arrived too recently to cause this. But you know her best. Only you can tell me why this is happening."

"What makes you so sure? You're the one who was assigned to study her while I got deported back to Arius. *You* should know her better."

"I wish I could. But she sees me every day. Myla doesn't miss me, let alone hate me. She misses you. And when the two of you met, you talked."

"So what do you want to know?"

"Just a few clues to my puzzle. You think you can share any?"

Xena purses her lips, "You've really changed. You've become

something else. You're not the Cinder we used to know."

"And you know that's not the Myla we used to know either."

*That's it!*

"NONE OF THIS IS FAIR!" Xena flares, pointing at the videos of Myla. "SHE DESERVES BETTER! We deserve better! And you're siding with the Elders!" she lunges at Cinder but the soldiers are quick to tackle her down.

"Easy, easy!" Cinder gestures. "It's just her hormones. She's okay."

"No, I'm not okay!" Xena shouts, her face pressed to the cold floor.

Cinder crouches low, "You incinerated both of your body suits yesterday. The records are gone. Do

you know how curious that makes me?"

"I won't tell you shit!"

"Not the answer I was hoping for, old friend," Cinder draws a syringe and waves it in front of her eyes.

Xena gasps. "What's that?"

"Something sour to help you tell the truth. Don't worry, you won't even know what you'll be talking about."

"You can't do this!" Xena struggles but doesn't budge under the force of the soldiers. "It's for Pandor and you know it. Now you have one last chance to help me and to help your best friend."

"Why don't you use the truth serum on Myla?"

Xena waits for the pause. There is no reply. *You don't have an answer!"* Do the Elders know you're doing this to me? You can't kill me. I could report you!"

"They'll understand why I'm doing this. But you... you're just like Myla. Stubborn. Arrogant."

"You'll lose your job," Xena pushes. "I'm not an enemy. You can't do this."

"You're forgetting that I can make you forget I did," Cinder sneers, scrubbing the needle along her neck. "Now smile!"

"Cinder!" Rhiannon barges in. One of the soldiers charges for him but Rhiannon quickly wraps his hand around the clone's wrist,



twisting him around before kicking him into the second clone.

Xena gets to her feet as the soldiers come down. She swiftly backs away towards Rhiannon.

"What's going on?"

"It's not of your business," says Cinder.

"She's just an intern."

"And you're all fools!" Cinder blares. His soldiers are up but he raises a hand to stop them. "Get out."

"Go!" Rhiannon tells Xena.

"I'm not going to leave you with him."

"I need a word," says Rhiannon.

"There will be no words," says Cinder. "I don't expect any of you to

understand the sacrifices that must be met. You don't realize the true meaning behind the Laws of Capricorn. And neither does she!" he spins around, pointing out the screen for Myla but all he sees is the robot, sitting quietly on a damaged head of Artemis.

His lips part in confusion. "Where is she?"

"Home," says Rhiannon. "She succeeded."

"But she didn't destroy the robot."

Rhiannon smirks, "She turned it off."

"Now that's badass!" says Xena.

"Not possible—"

"Cinder!" an alarming worker rushes into the room.

"What!" he looks up, agitated.

"There's an emergency! There is a breach in the Shield. We're doing all we can but the spark isn't working."

"Fix it!" Cinder yells.

"We have every technician in the Tower working on the spark. Mechanics, Macro-computer engineers. Everybody!"

Cinder exchanges worried looks with Rhiannon and Xena.

Motionlessly, they all understand what they must do.

"I'll get Myla!" Rhiannon heads out.

"You!" Cinder points at Xena,  
"You're coming with me."

"I didn't kill the spark!"

Cinder grabs her arm and the soldiers follow behind as they leave the building. "We'll see about that!"

"It wasn't her," says the worker, stopping Cinder dead in his tracks. His eyes meet with his but he's not prepared for the truth as it comes.

"One of our soldiers shot down the culprit. It was an enemy soldier. I'm sorry, sir. I believe they're here."

I don't think I would do this if it wasn't for the song *Sticky Behavior*. There's a line that goes something like: *a viewpoint is not a religion*. So I guess just because they say I can't do something doesn't mean I have to comply. What's wrong to me is right to them. So wrong and right are not pillars. They are clay. They change.

But maybe I'm doing all this thinking only to justify the fact that I'm standing in a public Teleport

chamber, waiting for my parents to accept my visit.

The overhead voice says:

### **Resending Request.**

They're probably contemplating whether they should let me in. I won't be upset if they reject me. I've been quite a bit of trouble lately. And the Elders can be fierce against law breakers.

Request approved.

*Really?*

I stare into empty space, shocked that they're letting me in. When I snap back to my senses I hit the red button and zap out of thin air, reappearing behind a curtain in my parents' home.

"Myla!" dad calls.

I jump out of the Teleport and he envelopes me in his arms.

"Dad!"

"Darling. I wondered when you'd pull the guts to pay a visit."

"Momo!" my mom snaps, coming to us from the kitchen.

Dad pulls away, "Mimi, it's just a visit."

Mom's face cringes, "You know we can't do this," she hisses, "The Elders will know."

"Well, we've already done it. Might as well flow with it. Ain't that right, Myla?" he rubs my shoulder and I grin, too happy to explain.

"Right!"

"How about some lunch?" he shows me to the table. A beautiful

mouth-watering recipe of fish, greens, carrots and cheese rests on a large oval plate. The steam rises from it. *It's still fresh!* I love the way my mom cooks fish. My household was probably the only family that still enjoyed cooking. Though most of the ingredients she used was cubed into Metros, it's still way better than a completely cubed meal.

"I'd love lunch. But just a little—"

Mimi doesn't let me decide how much food is on my plate and she goes out of her way to make sure I have a premium size meal in front of me.



"Little my foot! The Metros they give you must leave you starved all day!"

"And here's some orange juice. Remember the big O?"

I giggle, "Yeah, I remember that. That was way, way back before I was chosen."

"You were just a kid," says mom.

"Yeah. Wish I could've grown up with you guys."

The moment I say that mom's gaze lands on my dad's and they all pause until dad sets down the jug of juice.

"We wish for that too," says mom.

"But that can't happen. There's some tough stuff to do in the world

and we have to toughen up to get them done."

"What about Mylo?"

I know my parents will hate this topic but they couldn't think I wouldn't ask. It would be insane to pretend to act as if nothing is wrong and carry on.

"He's doing well," says dad.

"That's not what I meant," I snap, hating how naive that sounded.

"There's no reason why he can't be with you. He's not Lebra. How does that make you feel to have—"

My dad quickly rests his hand over mine. "It makes us feel terrible." His eyes lock with mine and I can see the honesty. And the hurt.

"You guys have two kids and you can't even watch them grow up."

"Myla," Mom beams at me. "What can we do? No one in our family asked for this. I'm very happy you're here but I'm sorry," she beams away and heads back to the kitchen. "This isn't the conversation I want to have with you right now."

I speak up, halting her under the threshold, "Can I at least know where he lives?"

Mimi turns around and dad presses my hand. "It's okay dear," he turns to Mimi. "Bring it."

She dives deep into the kitchen and returns with a Nanotop, small as a biscuit and sets it on the table. Dad pulls it his way and grabs two

corners, nodding to me to grab the other two. And we begin to pull. The Nanotop expands across the table, housing a bigger screen. We let go of the chamfers and dad spins it around, merely for fun since there is no power button like on the iPod.

"Location search: Mylo's place."

Instantly, the screen lights up, showing a bird's-eye view of our city. Then it zooms along the beach, speeding its way north. It stops at a lonely bungalow. The tides crash on the beach. As the angle shifts into a more oblique viewpoint, I realize how tall the trees are.

"It's a beautiful house," I don't take my eyes off it. It's a live image and I know my little brother is in

there. I stare for a long moment, hoping that he pops his head out the window or appears on the balcony.

"You're just like your mom," says dad.

I turn to Mimi and notice the films in her eyes. "I stare at that every day and sometimes I catch him running outside. Sometimes he plays on the beach and sometimes he's running across the balcony. He doesn't go into the forest much."

"We asked Elia to tell him scary stories about wild animals so he doesn't run off," says dad.

I snort, "Does he go to Engagement?"

"Soon he will."

I slip back in my seat, shuffling through my emotions. Dad and mom pull back too and it's only a matter of time before the Nanotop switches off. But I'm not done yet. I need to know exactly how to get there. The idea sinks into my heart and this may be my only chance.

"Map to Mylo's from Major Tower."

"Myla!" Mom shrieks but it's too late. The image zooms out and a red line zigzags its way from the Tower **to his place. Before she snatches the** Nanotop away I've already estimated the distance and examined the map in my mind, in every way I need to, relating

different locations I already know to my brother's home.

"Thank you," I rise from the table.

"You weren't supposed to do that!" she holds the Nanotop to her chest as if it was her son she was protecting.

"And I'm not supposed to be here."

"Dear," dad takes my hand.

"Would you like to see the view outside?"

"You know that's a long shot."

"And you know how much I miss you."

I rub my nose. *Calm down.* I let him lead me out to the balcony. A fence of glass stands waist-high. The waves crash against the

windows and the ocean is endless.  
The other floating homes ahead do  
make a great view.

Dad sighs, "Was that your plan?"

"Not initially."

"I won't lie. I'm quite impressed  
that you came here and mapped out  
Mylo's location."

"Why?"

He chuckles, "The rules aren't so  
tough on you. They just hope you  
comply and do as they say. You're  
the one they need. But us? One foot  
out of line and we could pay big.  
They don't need us, Myla. We don't  
have immunity. We can't throw  
caution to the wind like you and  
receive a lecture from one of the  
Elders to put us back in line."



"I get what you're saying. I'm sorry...that's why mom is scared, right?"

"She doesn't want this family to fall apart more than it already has."

It feels good that he is finally admitting that. It's not as pretty as it used to be.

"So what's it like without us?"

"You're all we talk about," he turns to me. "What's it like for you?"

"I don't know. It's... it's..." I look around but all I see falls short of inspiration. No words come. "I'm tired of it. I just want it to stop." I slam my fist on the fence and I love how it hurts. "I want Stretaka to come right now so we can finish

this! So I won't have to keep living like this anymore. I don't want to be perfection. All my life I've been chasing that horrible, ugly disease. I just wanna be me and do what I wanna do. That's perfect enough. I don't wanna be in a cage anymore."

My frustration comes out in ragged breaths. My chest heaves. I want to be water. To take any shape I like and just go crashing through the air. Like the waves that rise high and roll majestically in white foam, toward the beach.

Grey clouds build up in the horizon, extending over the waters. A few flocks of birds fly over our houses.

"We should get inside," says dad.  
"Looks like a mean storm is coming  
our way."

The Kronite bursts out of my  
Warrior belt and interlocks with the  
fabric in my clothes, shooting up all  
the way to my collarbone. It  
happens so fast I can barely gasp.  
*What's going on!*

I frantically spin around for any  
sign of an enemy.

There is nothing.

I turn my gaze back to the grey  
clouds. My guts stir up and my legs  
lose their strength. A nervous  
reaction travels down my spine and  
I know what I'm seeing is not the  
weather. Something else is coming.

"Myla, I know you're upset—"

"Dad, it's not the weather!"

The entire house suddenly flashes red and a warning message blares from the living-room.

**Attention: Everybody please report to the Emergency Bunks immediately. Pandor is under attack. I repeat, report to the Emergency Bunks immediately via the Teleports. Pandor is under attack...**

My feet are planted. I can't move. I exchange blood-drained faces with my dad and watch as every floating house on the water is beeping with the same warning, the same red light flashing inside.

It's happening.

"Momo!" mom rushes to my dad and none of us know what to do next.

"Myla!" The way he says my name unfreezes me. My heart jumps. Rhiannon is dashing to me and I run into his arms. But he's quick to push me out.

"We've been searching for you. Why weren't you home?"

"I—" I stammer. I can't go further than that. But under the red flashing light there's no need for a reply. This is an emergency.

He turns to my parents. "Get to the Emergency Bunks. NOW! Myla, follow me!"

There's no chance to say goodbye.  
I follow his quick steps as we return  
to the Port.

"I'm sorry, Rhiannon!"

"Save it for the Elders."

We step behind the curtain.

"Will Mylo be safe?"

"I hope," he pauses. "This is war,  
Myla."

"We love you!" my parents shout,  
a second before we disappear. And  
it's probably the last I'll ever hear  
from them as the grey clouds stir up  
in the sky, flowing towards the city.

My worst fears have begun.



a story of many songs is

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Thanks for the faith – *Pharrell Douglas*

# LOSS

"RHIANNON!"

"QUICKLY!"

I shield my eyes with my hand. The wind blasts into my face the moment we come out. My hair is dancing. The people of Doris run frantically in our direction. They knock each other to the ground and clog up the Teleports. This is the chaos of our worst nightmare.

Rhiannon is six feet away, fighting through the crowd and throwing backward glances at me to make sure I'm not left behind.

The journey to the Tower would be easier if they would only recognize me. They know about me, but no one really knows what I look like anymore.

We rush onto a grand bridge, hanging over a canopy of trees, against a rising hill. On the other side the ocean meets the sky where the grey clouds are rolling in. With every pounding heartbeat I take I know those aren't natural clouds.

I try not to stare. The crazed citizens are bustling around me, barely giving me way as I keep my eye on Rhiannon. But my peripheral vision can see it all: the daunting madness. The lurking enemy that has been waiting on me is finally on the horizon.

It's here. And it's happening.

"MYLA!"

As I turn away a woman carrying her kids rams into me, rushing her way to the Teleports. I fall on my side and a man steps on my hand. I want to yell and curse but I can't. I just hide my face as they leap over me. As soon as they diverge around I steal the chance to pick myself up but a dude with a face full of piercings comes my way. He grabs my shoulders to thrust me aside but barely makes it past me when a swift fist connects with his jaw. He flies to the ground and Rhiannon is standing right in front of me.

"Our ride is on the other side."

I clutch my shoulders, scanning around for the Autocop.

"Come on!"

I inhale deeply and orb up, keeping track behind Rhiannon. It seems to help with the crowd as we make our way through. They are forced to diverge around me like water.

As we approach the middle of the bridge we are ants on a terrifying and beautiful landscape. The green glows under a shower of golden rays as the sun sets behind the swirling grey clouds. The wind blows harder with each passing moment, bending the trees. It's so strong now I feel like I could lose my footing and fly up the hill.

The enormous buildings around the bridge are deserted. The only life inside is the red warning light and the electronic voices.

"We're almost there!" Rhiannon presses my hand, glancing back and assuring me with the care in his space black eyes. He swiftly turns back ahead and over his shoulder I can see the Autocop hovering in the air. The dust plumes around its propellers, steadying a landing on the other side.

Our ticket to the Tower!

The wind comes harder and the waves are swallowing the floating houses. The collective cracking of wood and furniture rips through the air. The waves meet the beach in a massive crash. It sounds like a waterfall. The shockwaves shoot right through my orb and climb up my spine.

And out of the grey they come.

No!

The hovercrafts buzz into the sky. Hundreds and thousands. All at once they appear like a flock of metallic birds, shaped like frisbees attached to boomerangs. Some of them in the frontline begin to spin around, the way coins do when you toss them in the air.

"Rhiannon!"

His hand presses harder into mine but he's not directing his caring eyes at me. He's gazing out at them. He knows it too. The craze on the bridge transforms into madness and confusion. Everybody knows it.

"Let's go!"

With an unexpected jolt Rhiannon has me back on our tracks. He let's go of me and reaches in front, violently pushing away anyone in our path. I run



right behind him as he streamlines my way. Some people collapse around him and I step on an old woman, her fragile arm snaps under my shoe. I hear the piercing scream of a child on the ground and catch a glimpse of his legs, twisted as he tries to crawl for his grandma. A boy my age with sandy hair bumps off my orb and flies across from me with sparks igniting off his skin.

I want to feel terrible. I deserve to. But there's no time for that. This is Capricorn's 2nd Law put into action.

In sequence with the other hovercrafts, the line behind begins to spin as well and golden lasers soar across the pink sky. Past the clouds and into the hills-

"MYLA!"

The explosion sends people off the railings. I am rocked off my feet.

"Myla!"

My side bangs against the railings and I hold my weight down. The blast sends the earth spurting off the hill like fireworks, ejecting trees and branches into the air. The dirt and wood fly over the bridge, pattering over my Kronite like rain. So I look away, holding on tightly to the metal bars under my arms as a boy and his dog are launched over the railings. Their screams chorus together with the hundreds of other cries, plummeting down into the depths of the city.

In shock I find my arm stretched out, grasping at a failed attempt to save at least the boy.

I couldn't.

The wind blows through the aftermath of the blast, whistling in the spaces between my fingers.

Rhiannon appears out of the dust and takes my hand, "C'MON!"

He gets me going again. It's all happening so fast it feels like a dream. A bad dream. My sense of time is damped with hurt, panic and confusion.

"We're almost there!"

The way ahead is a bit more clear after the explosion on the hill rocked half the people off. I wonder how it's something to feel positive about. I guess in a moment like this, it doesn't matter who you are. Your life and the lives of those you love are the only ones you find worth saving.

"What happens in the Tower?"

It's the best I can say out here as the hovercrafts soar over the hill. The sight of them sends icy chills all over my nervous system.

"We're going to destroy the Oracle!"

The words hit me like a slap in the face. I've never liked the Oracle but I understand more than anything how important it is. Not just for me. But for whatever future this planet could ever conceive. My lips have parted and I don't know what to say.

I find myself slowing down with surprise and two lasers find their way into the high rise jutting beside the bridge. The blast seems to beat on my eardrums like a bomb in my ear, drilling the pain into my skull. Black

smoke plumes, swallowing the turrets and as I cup my ears from the noise, I see the scariest thing.

A hovercraft breaks away from formation and flies down. It spins like a coin in random orientations before crashing straight through the building and zooming out, firing at the far mountains. The rubble and dust blast out the shattered windows, the glass glitters in the sun, engulfed in thick rolls of smoke and the debris begins to crash.

The screams echo everywhere and I zigzag through the panic. The Autocop rests on the other side of the bridge and Rhiannon is glancing between its sliding door and me as the rubble hits the ground.

I barely hear him scream my name as the building falls apart, pieces of concrete, equipment and glass shards tumbling down and smashing on the bridge. Exploding on impact and attacking those of us left.

The blood drains out of Rhiannon's face as he watches me in the dance of death. With a quick glance up at the falling debris I think I can find my way to the end of the bridge and dodge the rubble but I soon realize this won't work out as easily as hopscotch. And as Rhiannon's face becomes paler we realize that Lebra or not, life and death is no fair game.

The rubble hits the ground in front of me. Behind me. Before I know it the

high rise is falling over and I know I won't make it.

The horror on my trainer's face is the last thing I see as I wrap my arms around my body and whatever is left of the building comes down on me.

## About the Author

I dream to write stories that blow your  
hair backwards.

*#dream #believe #grow #love*

That's just about it.